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BY

HENRY S. SALT

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PREFACE

IT is the purpose of this little book—subject to the requirements of the series of which it forms a part—to present the chief features of De Quincey's character in a more harmonious, more sympathetic, and therefore more *human* aspect than that in which he is commonly regarded. For though his mastery as a writer has long been fully acknowledged, there is still, it would seem, a widespread misunderstanding of him as a man. It is the misfortune of some authors, or perhaps in some measure their fault, that undue prominence is given to one special incident in their lives; as, for example, in Thoreau's case, where his two-year sojourn at Walden has been so magnified in some readers' minds that they see him merely as "the hermit." In like manner the exaggerated idea of De Quincey as always and everywhere "the opium-eater"—a title of which, it must be admitted, he himself made excessive use for literary purposes—has warped the public view of him, by emphasizing too strongly one particular element of weakness, and at the same time concealing or minimizing the other elements of strength.

While, therefore, we must fully recognize the

part which opium played in De Quincey's life, and those consequent failings which he himself so unsparingly revealed, we must also note that he was much more than an opium-eater—that his opium-eating, in fact, was merely an incidental blemish in a long and honourable career. "I may affirm," he wrote, "that my life has been on the whole the life of a philosopher: from my birth I was made an intellectual creature, and intellectual in the highest sense my pursuits and pleasures have been." Nor was this all; for what is especially praiseworthy in De Quincey, yet has not received one half of its due meed of praise, is that together with his high gift of imagination, great literary powers, and deep insight into that mystic part of man's nature which few other writers have fathomed, he was endowed with most tender human sympathies and a sensibility in some respects far in advance, not only of his own age, but of that in which we now make bold to pass our confident judgments on him, nearly half-a-century after his death.

I have incorporated in the third chapter the substance of an article entitled "Some Thoughts on De Quincey" which I published nearly twenty years ago.

H. S. S.

DE QUINCEY

CHAPTER I

DE QUINCEY'S LIFE

IT has been said by De Quincey himself of the chronological method of biography that "one is so certain of the man's having been born, also of his having died, that it is dismal to be under the necessity of reading it." But in his own case such assurances are perhaps not altogether unneeded, for it might otherwise be doubted whether so strange a personality had not come, as Shelley was fabled to have come, from another planet—from whatever star is the birthplace of profound reverie and meditation. Let it be stated, therefore, that Thomas De Quincey, the master-dreamer of the nineteenth century, was born—prosaic fact—at Manchester, on August 15th, 1785, the fifth child[1] of a well-to-do merchant who traced his ancestry to the Normans. Of his parents it is enough to say this, that the father was a man of high integrity

[1] Some doubt has been thrown on the exact order of succession. There were eight children in all.

and cultured taste; the mother (whose maiden name was Penson) an intellectual woman of sincere but unsympathetic character, evangelical, conscientious, respected, and unbeloved.

It was not, however, in Manchester itself, but in its near neighbourhood, that De Quincey spent his childhood, first in a rustic dwelling called "The Farm," and then at "Greenhay," a country house built by his father, and at that time still outside the spreading circle of the city.[1] Here, in one or the other of these quiet retreats, he felt the earliest impressions of the glory of life and the pathos of life's withdrawal—that everlasting contrast which has been so marvellously depicted by him.[2] "Living in the country," he says, "I was naturally first laid hold of by rural appearances or incidents. The very earliest feelings that I recall of a powerful character were connected with some clusters of crocuses in the garden. Next I felt a passion of grief in a profound degree for the death of a beautiful bird, a kingfisher, which had been taken up in the garden with a broken wing. That occurred before I was two years of age. Next I felt, no grief at all, but awe the most enduring, and a dawning sense of the infinite, which brooded over me more or less after that time." Let the student of De Quincey mark well that "dawning sense of the infinite," for therein lies the clue to a full understanding of his genius and writings.

[1] The statement made in several biographies, and in his epitaph, that he was born at Greenhay, is an error.

[2] See pp. 63, 64.

Very impressive are the glimpses which are given us into this early home, where he, "the shyest of children," was growing up "with three innocent little sisters for playmates," while their father's absence abroad, under the impending doom of consumption, dimly overshadowed the household, and quickened the sensibilities of children who were "constitutionally touched with pensiveness." The exact dates of the "Infant Experiences" recorded in his Autobiography are open to some doubt; not so the fact that the dreaming tendency was alive in him at an extraordinarily tender age, together with that pathetic sense of human suffering under oppression, which to most children is a word of little meaning. "If there was one thing in this world," he says, in reference to some rumoured ill-treatment of a sister who died in infancy, "from which, more than any other, nature had forced me to revolt, it was brutality and violence," a saying amply verified in the whole story of his life. With his chapter on "The Affliction of Childhood," in which is related the death of his eldest sister, Elizabeth, to whom he was devotedly attached, and the wondrous trance which befell him as he stood by her body under the pomp of a high summer noon, every student of his writings is familiar; as also with the scarcely less memorable description of his father's midnight homecoming—that picture of "the sudden emerging of horses' heads from the deep gloom of the shady lane," and the "mass of white pillow against which the dying patient was reclining."

Then the scene shifts from these mystic forebodings to the hard actualities of life. After the death of their father, the charge of the children devolved upon four guardians, and at the age of eight the dreamy sensitive boy was sent to a day-school in Salford in company with an elder brother, William, who had hitherto proved so unmanageable that, in order to preserve the quiet of Greenhay, he had been relegated to the more congenial atmosphere of a public school. In a chapter on his "Introduction to the World of Strife," De Quincey has left us an inimitable picture of the turmoil into which he was plunged by the caprices of this pugilistic scapegrace, whose "genius for mischief amounted to inspiration," and of how he bore an unwilling part in a long-protracted warfare which they waged against the boys of a neighbouring factory, a contest which was none the less oppressive to the spirits of the timid child because he had to uphold the character of a major-general. At last, with the sale of Greenhay in 1796, and the break-up of the family home, this irksome military service came to an end, and he was sent, together with his younger brother, "Pink," to Bath Grammar School, where his remarkable talents, and surprisingly early grasp of the Greek and Latin languages, soon began to assert themselves. But this, again, was a cause of unexpected trouble to him, for the elder boys, resenting his prowess in Latin verses, admonished him, under the threat of "annihilation," to "write worse for the future," thus involving in new disquietude one

to whom "peace was the clamorous necessity of his nature."

What is said from time to time of some early-ripened genius, that he was "born a philosopher," is scarcely an exaggeration in De Quincey's case; and what is even rarer, his was a precocity almost wholly free from priggishness. His childhood over, we see him for a period at Bath; then for a year at another school at Winkfield, in Wiltshire; next, in the summer of 1800, spending a long holiday in Ireland with his young friend Lord Westport, at a time when the passing of the Act of Union was causing a great stir in Irish society—and then he suddenly emerges on us, from the state of pupilage, a full-blown scholar, thinker, and conversationist. "That boy," said one of his teachers, "could harangue an Athenian mob, better than you or I could address an English one." "In me," says De Quincey himself, "though naturally the shyest of human beings, intense commerce with men of every rank, from the highest to the lowest, had availed to dissipate all arrears of *mauvaise honte*; I could talk upon innumerable subjects"; and accordingly we find him, when visiting his mother's friend, Lady Carbery, in his sixteenth year, holding learned dissertations with her on all sorts of topics, from Herodotus to theology.

No wonder, then, that a youth thus possessed of a passion for speculating "upon great intellectual problems" was weary of school tasks which had become tedious and childish to him, and of what he calls "the odious spectacle of

magoria of a dream, yet were in real fact undergone by him—the sojourn of the friendless youth in London; the long waiting on the Jewish moneylenders; the delays, disappointments and privations; the nightly refuge in the empty house in Greek Street, with one starveling child as a companion; the weary pacing of the endless miles of streets; the friendship with the "pariah" Ann, immortalized by him in one of his most tenderly beautiful passages; and then the sudden unexplained reconciliation and return to his friends.[1] If the *reason* be asked of his submission to these hardships when a word spoken might have freed him, we can but point to that subtle and elusive element in his nature, which, itself unaccountable, is our only means of accounting for many of his actions. It is clear, however, that this period of wandering, in Wales first, and then in London, with all that the contrast implied—for, like other imaginative thinkers, he was powerfully drawn in two seemingly diverse directions, by the spell of the wild mountains on the one hand, and by the spell of the crowded city on the other—had a most important formative effect upon his character. It was his sojourn in the wilderness, his "novitiate," his apprenticeship in serious thought, and it "peopled his mind with memorials of human sorrow and strife too profound to pass away for years."

At the end of 1803, having now arrived at an

[1] As the incidents referred to are fully described in the "Confessions of an Opium-Eater," summarized in Chapter IV, they are but briefly mentioned at this point.

understanding with his relatives, De Quincey entered his name at Worcester College, Oxford. He came there, he tells us, "in solitary self-dependence," and it was as a solitary retiring spirit that he was known to his fellow-students (by whom his "fervent youth" was little suspected), one who dressed with negligence and avoided social gatherings, yet was even then rumoured to be a master of profound and multifarious learning. His passion for reading was in truth, in his own words, so "absolutely endless" that all else was sacrificed to it; and his studies embraced not only the Greek and Latin languages, but also a wide field of English literature and German metaphysics. He could not enter a great library without pain at heart, to think that to him the vast bulk of such treasures must perforce remain unread. It was reasonable to suppose that so insatiable a scholar would reap the highest honours that his university had to confer. What actually happened, when the crisis came, was that De Quincey, true to his elusive instinct, after astonishing the examiners by his performances in Latin, unaccountably absented himself from the subsequent *vivâ voce* in Greek, and once again vanished into space. This was in 1807, but his name remained on the College books till 1810.

And now there arose for De Quincey a far stronger and more lasting influence than that of Oxford—his twenty years' association with Grasmere and the English Lakes. Even from childhood the thought of the Lake District had been

to him "a secret fascination," the very names of the hills and dales having a magic for his ear; and when to this attraction was added the spell of Wordsworth's poetry, of which he was one of the very earliest readers, he was irresistibly drawn towards a place which had thus a double message for him. Twice during his residence at Oxford he had started on pilgrimage to Grasmere, having received a kindly invitation from Wordsworth, and twice his heart had failed him and he had turned back from the very threshold of the valley; but at last, in 1807, he found himself in the poet's presence and became a frequent guest in the family. A "dim presentiment," too, he had of a still closer connection with Grasmere; and this was fulfilled two years later, when, the Wordsworths having moved to another house, he succeeded them, with Dorothy Wordsworth's assistance, in Dove Cottage, which thenceforth remained to him the home and centre of his dearest hopes and most sacred recollections. It should be pointed out that De Quincey was a "Lakist" in a truer sense—by a deeper and more instinctive attachment—than any of the so-called Lake poets, excepting Wordsworth himself.

Since coming of age in 1806, De Quincey had been in no want of funds, and he had used the ampler means now at his disposal (it is surmised that he had converted his annuity into ready money) for spending considerable time in London, Bath, Bristol, and elsewhere, and enjoying the acquaintance of literary men of mark, such as Coleridge, Lamb, Godwin, Talfourd, and

Hazlitt. In the Lake District his circle of friends included not only Wordsworth and Coleridge, to the latter of whom he had given substantial proof of his regard in the form of a handsome gift of money, but also Southey, Charles Lloyd, and John Wilson ("Christopher North"), who had been his contemporary, though then unknown to him, at Oxford, and was now to be his most intimate companion. Of children he was always a lover; and the young Wordsworths were as devotedly attached to him as he to them. He has recorded how deeply he was affected by the death of little Kate Wordsworth in 1812.

The life among the mountains was, of all lives, the most congenial to his tastes. Immersed in his books, which filled and over-filled his cottage, he read deeply and more deeply in various branches of literature, interrupting his studies at times by expeditions with Wilson or the Wordsworths to other parts of the district, or in solitary nocturnal rambles (for he was an indefatigable walker) through the silent glens, where he loved "to trace the course of the evening through its household hieroglyphics" in the window-lights of remote dwellings, or to hear church clocks proclaiming the hours of the night "under the brows of mighty hills." A still more powerful tie was to bind him to Grasmere in 1816, when he married Margaret Simpson, a girl of eighteen, the daughter of a neighbouring dalesman. She appears to have possessed, in a remarkable degree, that gracious beauty which is characteristic of the women of Lakeland, and to have been no less to

De Quincey than what he calls her, in a pathetic retrospect, an "angel of life."

But while we picture him in this his "year of brilliant water," at the height of his intellectual powers, and living the philosophic life amid the most sympathetic surroundings, we must also look back a few years in order to realize what strong counteracting influence had been building itself up side by side with his happiness, and laying a remorseless grasp on his mind. It was during his Oxford days, under stress of severe neuralgia, that he had first "tampered with opium"; and though he was not for some years a victim to the habit, he continued to use the drug, partly because it afforded him relief from a painful ulceration of the stomach, the result, it is supposed, of his privations in London, and partly because it brought a serener ecstasy, an "abyss of divine enjoyment," to those day-dreams and reveries to which from childhood he had been addicted. Then, by degrees, the penalty had to be paid in that paralysis of will, terrific dream-imagery, and other morbid symptoms so luridly pictured in his "Confessions." We are not to regard him as wholly or continuously disabled by this curse; what he lost was not the use of his higher faculties—which indeed were in some ways rendered still more poignant and vivid—but the assured, equable, and unbroken use of them; he had conjured up a power which enriched him and impoverished him at the same time. "Opium," he remarks, in commenting on the parallel case of Coleridge, "gives and takes away. It defeats

the *steady* habit of exertion; but it creates spasms of irregular exertion. It ruins the natural power of life; but it developes preternatural paroxysms of intermitting power." Thenceforth, in all his doings, he had to reckon with this inexorable fact.

Yet it was out of this very discomfiture that he snatched his greatest triumph. After several years of marriage, with children growing up around him, his patrimony exhausted, and the opium-habit unsubdued, it became pressing that he should earn money by his pen. At first it was to journalism that he turned, and in 1819 we find him installed at Kendal as editor of the Tory local paper, the "Westmorland Gazette"; then, two years later, he betook himself to London and, by Talfourd's introduction, joined the staff of the leading periodical of that day, the "London Magazine," where, in September and October, 1821, appeared two memorable articles—"The Confessions of an English Opium-Eater."

The immediate and signal success of De Quincey's self-revelations, which were republished in the form of a small volume in 1822, determined the whole future course of his life, and gave him, in his character of "The English Opium-Eater," a free entry into the foremost literary journals and society of men of letters. For three years he was himself a contributor to the "London Magazine," and on friendly terms with the able band of writers whom the publishers had gathered around them, notably with Lamb, Hazlitt, and Thomas Hood, who was acting as sub-editor. And now,

at this climax in his career, it may be well if we pause to consider what manner of man he seemed, who was beginning to be spoken of by critics and readers as a new and shining light in literature.

De Quincey was short in stature and insignificant in appearance ("I have myself a mean personal appearance," he wrote, "and I love men of mean appearance"), and it was not until he was launched into speech that his rare nature made itself felt; his gentleness, humility, and extreme deference of manner might at first have suggested that he was less qualified to talk than to listen. But his voice—all accounts are at one in describing *that* as something wholly out of the common; it was so silvery, spiritual, and winning. "His voice was extraordinary," says one who knew him, "it came as if from dreamland; but it was the most musical and impressive of voices."[1] Nor was there any doubt as to the potent charm of his conversation among those privileged to hear it; and it was not always to be heard. Here is Hood's account:

> When it was my frequent and agreeable duty to call on Mr. De Quincey, and I have found him at home, quite at home, in the midst of a German Ocean of literature in a storm, flooding all the floor, the tables; billows of books tossing, tumbling, surging open—on such occasions I have willingly listened by the hour, whilst the philosopher, standing with his eyes fixed on one side of the room, seemed to be less speaking than reading from "a handwriting on the wall."

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[1] "Memoirs of a Literary Veteran," by R. P. Gillies.

"I had formed to myself the idea," says Richard Woodhouse, another member of the "London Magazine" circle, "of a tall, thin, pale, gentlemanly-looking, courtier-like man; but I met a short sallow-looking person of a very peculiar cast of countenance, and apparently much an invalid. His demeanour was very gentle, modest, and unassuming; and his conversation fully came up to the idea I had formed of what would be that of the writer of those articles."

In De Quincey, as in Shelley, there was something of "the eternal child"; something, too, of the child's diffidence and helplessness in worldly matters and things remote from the intellectual life in which he had his being. Carlyle's picture of him is worth quoting, of course with the necessary reservation for the Carlylean gall:

> He was a pretty little creature, full of wire-drawn ingenuities; bankrupt enthusiasms, bankrupt pride; with the finest silver-toned low voice, and most elaborate gently-winding courtesies and ingenuities in conversation. You would have taken him, by candlelight, for the beautifullest little Child; blue-eyed, blonde-haired, sparkling face—had there not been something too which said, "Eccovi, this Child has been in Hell."

This dæmonic, inscrutable aspect of De Quincey, indicated by Carlyle's remark, was the outward sign of the profound intellectual abstraction in which he lived so much of his life. He was not, indeed, as other men are; for whereas *they* are concerned mostly with the world of sense, the world which for *him* had the greater interest

and reality was the world of ideas. In particular, the dreaming faculty was, as we have seen, innate in him; it was not the product of opium-eating, though it was quickened and heightened by opium to an altogether abnormal and morbid degree; and that it was consciously fostered and developed by him is apparent from the avowed object of his greatest work—"to reveal something of the grandeur which belongs potentially to human dreams." If it be remembered, then, that he regarded "the sense of sympathy with the invisible" (*sensus infiniti*) as "the great test of man's grandeur," and that, as he points out, the faculty of dreaming "is the one great tube through which man communicates with the shadowy," we shall the better understand that however wide the range of his learning, however keen his logic and trenchant his humour—and in his case the imaginative and the logical qualities were never far apart—he was primarily a dreamer of dreams, and that this was the cause of the strange aloofness and self-absorption that were noticeable in his manner.

These peculiarities on De Quincey's part may in some measure explain his gradual estrangement from Wordsworth; while he, on the other side, had been so repelled by a certain hardness and intellectual arrogance in Wordsworth's character, that, though still remaining a profound admirer of his poetic genius, he despaired of any "equal friendship" between them.[1] De

[1] Another and more potent cause of disunion was the neglect with which the Wordsworths (Dorothy excepted)

Quincey's relation to the respectabilities of Grasmere was not unlike that of Thoreau to the respectabilities of Concord—the attitude of a detached and amused observer—and it may be guessed that his avowed shortcomings in moral enthusiasm and practical enterprise must have caused him to be looked upon with some misgiving as a wolf in the Wordsworthian fold. "At my time of life," he confessed (six and thirty years), "it cannot be supposed that I have much energy to spare; and therefore let no man expect to frighten me, by a few hard words, into embarking any part of it upon desperate adventures of morality." This must have been a hard saying for Grasmere to read; yet De Quincey, as we shall see, was very far from being a mere lotus-eater or indifferentist; on the contrary, his benevolence was one of the most marked features of his character, and he was much ahead of contemporary thought in those humane sympathies—enlarged and deepened by his personal experience of suffering—which are of the very essence of morals.

It is not surprising, then, that from the date of his plunge into authorship, De Quincey's life at Grasmere was never renewed on quite the same footing as before. There were frequent absences for business purposes in London, and later in Edinburgh, where, through the influence of his friend Professor Wilson, he had a growing literary

treated Mrs. De Quincey. See "The Century Magazine," April, 1891, "The Wordsworths and De Quincey," by H. A. Page.

connection, and became, from 1826 onward, a regular contributor to "Blackwood's Magazine." Finally, in 1830, when a series of new engagements were detaining him in Scotland, it was decided, at the suggestion of Dorothy Wordsworth, who on more than one occasion had thus acted as a sort of providence for the household, to remove his family from Grasmere to Edinburgh, where he spent the remaining years of his life.

It must be pointed out, however, that Edinburgh never became to him in any sense the home and inspiration that Grasmere had been. A brilliant intellectual centre it might be, but it was not for that reason that he sought it, nor did he ever mingle in its society. He came there a stranger, in middle age, when his children, now eight in number, were needing more and more to be provided for; and Edinburgh was simply a convenient place of residence where he could write his many magazine articles and get them published on the spot. His home was still the little rose-covered cottage at Grasmere, which, in his "Confessions," and elsewhere, he has so incomparably described;[1] and it is pathetic to

[1] See p. 100. It is to be regretted that, in the present exclusive dedication of Dove Cottage as a Wordsworthian temple, De Quincey's longer, closer, and in some ways more interesting and sympathetic connection with the house should have been wholly ignored. He is represented there by a single portrait, which in the official catalogue is classed under "Portraits of the Guests who have slept in Dove Cottage"—that is to say, he is commemorated not as one who occupied the cottage for twenty years, and

find him, long years afterwards, referring to it as still "unspeakably endeared" to his heart. "Even now," he says, "I rarely dream through four nights running that I do not find myself (and others besides) in some one of those rooms, and most probably the last cloudy delirium of approaching death will re-install me in some chamber of that same humble cottage."

He had not been long at Edinburgh when a series of bereavements befell him, his youngest son dying in 1833, and his eldest son, "the crown and glory of his life," in 1835. Two years later took place the death of his wife, that "woman of steady mind, tender and deep in her excess of love," whose gracious presence and helpful sympathy are the subject of a few brief but heartfelt references in his writings. Thus left a widower, he was indebted during the remainder of his days to the affectionate care of his daughters for that attention and aid in worldly matters which he above all men needed.

The earlier phase of De Quincey's work at Edinburgh consisted almost entirely in the writing of magazine articles; of volumes he published two only—a story named "Klosterheim" (1832), and his "Logic of Political Economy" (1844). Of his vast output as an essayist only the leading works can here be mentioned. To "Blackwood," for instance, where there had already appeared, among other things, his grimly humorous sally on "Murder considered as one of the

wrote a description of it which will last as long as English literature, but as a casual guest of the Wordsworths!

GRASMERE.

Fine Arts" (1827), he contributed his biographical studies of Kant and Dr. Samuel Parr, followed by his historical sketches of "The Caesars" and "The Revolt of the Tartars," the essays on "Style" and "Rhetoric," "The Philosophy of Herodotus," and later the famous "Suspiria de Profundis" and "The English Mail Coach" (1849). During a portion of the same period (1834-1836) he was publishing in "Tait's Magazine" his widely-read "Autobiography of an English Opium-Eater," and later his Lake reminiscences of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Southey, to whose families he gave great offence (in his character of the *enfant terrible* of Grasmere) by certain pointed anecdotes and criticisms. In "Tait" also appeared "Joan of Arc" and "The Spanish Military Nun," one of the most brilliant and characteristic of his narratives. Then, in the "Encyclopædia Britannica," he was the author, between 1830 and 1840, of lengthy and important articles on Goethe, Pope, Schiller, and Shakespeare; and at a yet later period he contributed to "Hogg's Instructor" and other magazines. Altogether it might puzzle those who persist in regarding De Quincey as a mere enfeebled visionary, to account for the rich literary and intellectual harvest of the autumn of his life.

The opium habit, to free himself from which, as narrated in his "Confessions," he had made strenuous and painful efforts, still kept its hold on him; but, by the discovery of an irreducible minimum in his recourse to the drug, he arrived

at a sort of compromise with the foe, under which, with the aid of his long daily (or nightly) walk, he contrived to maintain a certain measure of health. It was his firm belief—corroborated to some extent by medical opinion—that his use of opium, in spite of the terrible sufferings which he had incurred through over-indulgence, had been the means of warding off a tendency to consumption inherited from his father, and thus of prolonging his life.

For a time De Quincey had no fixed abode in Edinburgh, but from 1840 onward he and his daughters rented a cottage at Lasswade, a village situated seven miles distant on the river Esk. He still continued, however, to make frequent sojourns in the town, and many laughable tales are told of his strange adventures in the lodging-houses patronized by him, where, in some cases, his unbusinesslike habits, his ignorance of money matters, and his extreme kindness, made him an easy prey to schemers.[1] It is of this declining period, when his weaknesses and eccentricities

[1] Quite the best instance of these impostures is the letter addressed to De Quincey by some persons with whom he had lodged, who (as Mr. Hogg tells us) "went so far as to try and touch his feelings by feigning death in the family":

"Mr. De Quincey, Sir,—In accordance with your request I have made out the enclosed items, money for which I would want for my mother's funeral. She is to be buried to-morrow at four o'clock, and *would like things settled as early as possible to-day.*"

It will be seen that what was here lost in grammar was gained in truth.

were naturally increased, that the most numerous records have been preserved; a fact for which some allowance ought to be made in any general estimate of his character. Latterly, his most frequented residence was at 42, Lothian Street, where he was well and faithfully cared for.

His personal appearance, in 1852, was described by Mr. J. R. Findlay as follows:

> He was a very little man (about 5 feet 3 or 4 inches); his countenance the most remarkable for its intellectual attractiveness that I have ever seen. His features, though not regular, were aristocratically fine, and an air of delicate breeding pervaded the face. His forehead was unusually high, square, and compact.

Mr. Findlay also describes the weird, shrunken appearance of De Quincey, as he would glide, furtively and dreamily, "with an oddly deferential air," through the streets of Edinburgh, his clothes "having a look of extreme age, and also of having been made for a person somewhat larger than himself."

To Miss Mitford, in like manner, he appeared as "so neglected that he looks like an old beggar, of manners so perfect that they would do honour to a prince, and of conversation unapproached for brilliancy"; while Mr. James Hogg, who was closely associated with him towards the end, was impressed by "the gentle, refined fastidious manner . . . the soft rhythmical utterance, as if the procession of words had been duly marshalled, all fit for duty. However fantastic the

thought that was uttered, the exquisite cadence lent a singular charm to the most grotesque idea."

It has been said by Mr. Shadworth Hodgson, in his able essay on "The Genius of De Quincey," that he was almost perfectly described in the following stanza from Thomson's "Castle of Indolence":

> He came, the bard, a little Druid wight,
> Of withered aspect; but his eye was keen,
> With sweetness mix'd. In russet brown bedight,
> As is his sister of the copses green,
> He crept along, unpromising of mien.
> Gross he who judges so. His soul was fair,
> Bright as the children of yon azure sheen.
> True comeliness, which nothing can impair,
> Dwells in the mind; all else is vanity and glare.

Such were the external impressions made by De Quincey on those who were fortunate enough to know him; but his inner thoughts and deeper self remained, as ever, a mystery. That the dreaming faculty was still keenly alive in him, even in these closing days of bereavement and solitude, may be judged from a passage in one of his latest essays. "As regards myself," he says, "touch but some particular key of laughter and of echoing music, sound but for a moment one bar of preparation, and immediately the pomps and glories of all that has composed for me the delirious vision of life re-awaken for torment; the orchestras of the earth open simultaneously to my inner ear; and in a moment I behold, forming themselves into solemn pomps

and processions, and passing over sad phantom stages, all that chiefly I have loved, or in whose behalf chiefly I have abhorred and cursed the grave—all that should *not* have died, yet died the soonest."

But while he assiduously avoided the literary circles of Edinburgh, and an introduction to him was a thing to be obtained only by much pertinacity, or even by craft, it must not be supposed that De Quincey was so absorbed in his day-dreams as to be lacking in the domestic affections. On the contrary, his letters to his daughters during his closing years are one of the most pleasing features in his biography, and show him, in the midst of his labours in Lothian Street, filled with the most tender and anxious solicitude for the members of his now scattered family—for his sons were following their professions abroad, and two of his daughters were married. From the tone of these letters, as indeed from all his writings, one gathers that, though self-centred in thought, De Quincey was always moved by a most watchful sympathy and consideration for those who were nearest to him; with all its great and varied qualities, his nature above everything was a loving and lovable one.

From what has been said of his intense mental abstraction, and his desultory habits in practical life, it will be readily understood that methodical work—even on the subjects which he had most at heart—was out of the question for him; and we can therefore well believe that, on an occasion when he was urged to make a collection of

his scattered writings, his reply was as follows: "Sir, the thing is absolutely, insuperably, and for ever impossible." And certainly to one who had published some hundred and fifty magazine articles, of which he had mostly lost the copies; whose manuscripts, such at least as had not been left behind in Edinburgh hotels or lodgings during his frequent flittings from house to house, were kept in a large bath, his literary reservoir, "filled to the brim by papers of all sorts and sizes"; and who seldom passed an evening without setting something on fire, usually his own hair—it might well seem impossible to attempt the issue of a collected edition of his works. Yet this impossibility, thanks to the enterprise of two publishing firms, Messrs. Ticknor and Fields, of Boston, and Mr. James Hogg, of Edinburgh (the idea having occurred independently to both), was successfully accomplished, the American edition, under Mr. Fields' management, appearing between the years 1851 and 1855, and the English edition between 1853 and 1860. The production of the latter series was supervised by the author—himself supervised by Mr. Hogg—with what intervening delays, hindrances, losses, misplacements, promises and non-performances, the student of De Quincey's character may easily imagine.

It was while he was engaged on this work, and when the fourteenth and last volume was shortly forthcoming, that it became evident that De Quincey's life was drawing to an end, not from any specific illness, but from a slow decay

of his physical strength. A record of his last days, written by the physician who attended him, bears witness, like all other records, to his unfailing gentleness and benignity: his last words were an expression of thanks to those around him, "uttered with touching sweetness and radiant expression." He died at his lodgings in Lothian Street, in his seventy-fifth year, on December 8th, 1859. "On the simple uncurtained pallet," says a friend who hastened to the house on hearing a rumour of De Quincey's death, "the tiny frame of this great dreamer lay stretched in his last long dreamless sleep. Attenuated to an extreme degree, the body looked infantile in size—a very slender stem for the shapely and massive head that crowned it."[1]

He was buried beside his wife in the West Churchyard of Edinburgh. One cannot but feel that a fitter resting-place for both of them would have been in the vale of Grasmere; in which connection his own words, written many years earlier, come to mind: "I have particular fancies about the place of my burial: having lived chiefly in a mountainous region, I rather cleave to the conceit that a grave in a green churchyard, amongst the ancient and solitary hills, will be a sublimer and more tranquil place of repose for a philosopher."

1 "Personal Recollections of Thomas de Quincey," by J. R. Findlay.

CHAPTER II

HIS WORKS

WHOSOEVER approaches De Quincey's works with a view to "classifying" them will at least convince himself of one hard fact—that they for the most part defy classification; nor, indeed, is this at all surprising, when one remembers the conditions under which they were originally produced. From the year 1821, when he first became an author, to 1851, when the American collected edition began to appear, De Quincey was sending forth in quick succession a series of brilliantly versatile articles, covering an immense field of thought, and written under continuous pressure as contributions to magazines, a mode of publication which, as he points out in his Preface to the first Edinburgh edition, "by its harsh, peremptory punctuality, drives a man into hurried writing." Hence, though he assures us that he had never faltered in his purpose of republishing most of what he had written, the difficulties that stood in the way of such republication were very great, and he quickly realized, as his editors have realized since, that such thirty-years' output of heterogeneous papers

can in no possible way be satisfactorily grouped and tabulated under a few general headings. "The difficulty," he says, "is prodigiously aggravated when the separate parts, that are suddenly and unexpectedly required to cohere into a systematic whole, arose originally upon casual and disconnected impulses, without any view to final convergement, or any reference whatever to a central principle."

The starting-point of all subsequent classification, or attempted classification, of De Quincey's writings, was the edition issued in fourteen volumes at Edinburgh, 1853-1860, under his own supervision, and entitled "Selections Grave and Gay, from Writings Published and Unpublished, by Thomas De Quincey." But it is quite possible that this collection would never have been made, had not the American edition preceded it; and his indebtedness to Boston in this respect is playfully acknowledged by the author. "It is astonishing," he says, "how much more Boston knows of my literary acts and purposes than I do myself. Were it not through Boston, hardly the sixth part of my literary undertakings would ever have reached posterity." As it was, with the American edition to draw upon, and a number of articles at hand, culled from "Tait," "Blackwood," and other periodicals, he was enabled, under the stimulus of the friendly importunities of his publisher, to carry the scheme into effect, and in his Preface he has given what he calls "a rude general classification" of the contents.

In the first division he places that portion of

his work—he instances the "Autobiographical Sketches"—which is designed primarily to *amuse*, but occasionally reaches a higher level and passes into "an impassioned interest."

Secondly, he groups together under the general name of "Essays," those papers (a very large and varied class) which appeal mainly to the *understanding*, *e.g.*, the speculative article on "The Essenes" and the historical sketch of "The Caesars."

Thirdly, as a far higher class, he ranks the *impassioned prose* of the "Suspiria de Profundis" and the "Confessions of an Opium-Eater"—in other words, his "literature of power."

Such was the synthesis laid down by De Quincey in his Preface of 1853; but, as might have been foreseen, it proved far more applicable in theory than in practice. For in the later collecting and editing, as in the original writing, of his essays, he was hampered not only by ill-health, but by many other obstacles caused largely by his own unbusinesslike habits, and was compelled to work not as his sense of logical fitness prompted him, but as the exigencies of the moment dictated. His papers, as he expressed it, were "written under one set of disadvantages, and revised under another." Hence, as Professor Masson has observed, there resulted "the most provoking jumble in the contents of the fourteen volumes, mixed kinds of matter in the same volume, and dispersion of the same kinds of matter over volumes wide apart, and yet all with a pretence of grouping, and with factitious sub-titles invented

for the separate volumes on the spur of the moment."

Nevertheless, in spite of De Quincey's failure to give effect to his own principle of classification, that principle ought to carry more weight with students of his writings than any later arrangement can do, for with all his defects of temperament and disadvantages of situation, he may be presumed to have known best what it was that he intended; so that it is to be regretted that later editors have made confusion worse confounded through attempting to improve on the author's edition by introducing new and different classifications of their own. Nor is it only in regard to the grouping of the works that these variations have arisen; for his chief editor, not content with rearranging De Quincey's works, and in some cases altering their titles, has included in the edition of 1889-1890 a good deal of material which had appeared in magazine articles prior to 1853, but had been omitted—in some cases deliberately—by De Quincey from the collected edition. All admirers of De Quincey are greatly indebted to Professor Masson for his long and invaluable services both as biographer and editor, and for the light he has thrown on a large number of passages in his author's life and writings; but it may be doubted whether the liberties thus taken, in practically reconstructing De Quincey's work, are not somewhat excessive. That some of the articles discarded by De Quincey in 1853 contain matter of great interest will be generally acknowledged; but it would have been easy to include

these in the revised edition as an appendix, without breaking up the whole structure. Nor can it be pleaded in favour of the later arrangement that its violation of the author's own scheme is justified by its freedom from the faults of its predecessor; for unfortunately—so impossible is it to "classify" De Quincey at all—it is occasionally open to much the same criticism on the score of its incongruous elements. Could De Quincey himself have done worse than make Charlemagne and Joan of Arc hobnob with Charles Lamb and Dr. Samuel Parr in one and the same cover, under the common title of "Biographical Sketches"?

In this little book, therefore, since an attempt has to be made, not indeed to catalogue De Quincey's writings—for that would be an undertaking too ambitious for a series which calls itself "miniature"—but to give a clear and succinct impression of their most salient features, we shall, as far as possible, follow the principle outlined by De Quincey himself; that is, we shall briefly refer to the most important of the works under the three heads of (1) those designed primarily to amuse the reader; (2) those addressed purely to the understanding; (3) those that may be classed as prose poems or "impassioned prose." It must be premised, of course, that the three kinds of writing often overlap in the same essay, and that it is only in a general sense that it is possible thus to present them in separate form.

I. *Autobiographical and Biographical Sketches and Reminiscences, Miscellaneous Articles, Tales, etc.*

The "Autobiographic Sketches," which formed the first volume of the collected edition of 1853, were based on articles contributed to "Tait's Magazine" (1834-1836) under the title of "Sketches of Men and Manners from the Autobiography of an English Opium-Eater." With these were incorporated portions of the "Suspiria de Profundis," from "Blackwood's Magazine" (1845), and "A Sketch from Childhood," which appeared in "Hogg's Weekly Instructor" (1851, 1852); all of which were treated by the author as raw material to be worked up anew with such omissions and additions as seemed fit. Together with the autobiographical passages in the "Confessions of an Opium-Eater," these sketches cover the early period of his life, from his "Infant Experiences" to his admission at Worcester College, Oxford; there is also an interesting paper on "Oxford," omitted by De Quincey, but reprinted by Professor Masson, which carries the record a step further. De Quincey himself describes the Autobiography as "pretending to little beyond that sort of amusement which attaches to any real story, thoughtfully and faithfully related"; but he adds that the narrative rises at times "into a far higher key"—as in the well-known rhapsody on "The Affliction of Childhood" (originally part of the "Suspiria"), one of the most characteristic and im-

passioned of his efforts. Of the remaining chapters, two at least deserve special reference—the one entitled "Introduction to the World of Strife," in which he tells, in his most delightful fashion, the story of his enforced military service under that supreme tyrant of the nursery, his elder brother William; and the other devoted to the adventures of his younger brother "Pink," whose ill-usage at the hands of one of the brutal schoolmasters too common at that time, was in part the cause of De Quincey's strong and often-repeated detestation of corporal punishments.

Closely allied to the "Autobiography" are the "Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets," including the singularly beautiful "Early Memorials of Grasmere," a record of the tragedy which befell a small household in the upland solitude of Easedale, through one of those heavy snow-storms which not infrequently cause loss of life on the fells. De Quincey's picture of the death of the parents, and of the heroism of the forsaken children, has the rare merit of *fidelity*; it is a true mountain-idyll, which has caught something of the high grandeur and serenity of the mountains themselves. The essays on Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey are all good specimens of that favourite class of writing in which De Quincey "retraced fugitive memorials" of celebrated men known to him either personally or by repute, and which was well adapted to his "scenical" style of biography and rather desultory methods of work. "In genial moments," he says, "the characteristic remembrances of

men expand as fluently as buds travel into blossoms"; but he goes on to speak of the dangers which lurk in such reminiscences of saying what may be taken amiss, for "seldom is your own silent retrospect of close personal connections with distinguished men altogether happy." De Quincey's sketches of the three Lake poets are in the main very appreciative; but, as already hinted, they contained criticism which caused no little resentment among the parties concerned. Among the other Lake reminiscences, by far the most remarkable piece of writing is the essay on Charles Lloyd.[1]

Then there is what has been called De Quincey's "Portrait Gallery," which might be made to include a number of his short, poignant monographs, undertaken, perhaps, in the first instance, with no very ambitious intent, yet masterpieces, many of them, in the art of vivid portraiture, and sometimes rising to the "impassioned interest" of a higher aim. Especially is this true of his article on "Walking Stewart" ("London Magazine," 1823), which, indeed, is far more than a sketch of a "sublime visionary," and itself deserves to be ranked among dream-writings of the foremost class. Very striking, again, are the pen-portraits of Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt, among contemporaries with whom De Quincey had been familiar, while of those known to him through the medium of books and hearsay, Shelley stands out conspicuous as the subject of

[1] See pp. 78, 79.

the most generous and sympathetic tribute. The most important of the other members of the "Gallery" are Professor Wilson, Sir William Hamilton, John Foster, W. S. Landor, the Marquess Wellesley and John Keats.

Among De Quincey's miscellaneous writings there are a few whose dominant tone of humour seems to assign them to this category of works intended primarily to amuse; and the chief of these is, of course, that elaborate and well-sustained, yet withal sparkling piece of phantasy, his "Murder considered as one of the Fine Arts." Published originally in two separate articles ("Blackwood," February, 1827, and November, 1839), it was revised and amplified in the collected works by the addition of a Postscript (1854) which gives a detailed and serious account of the dreadful "Williams murders" which had created a deep public sensation in December, 1811. To understand De Quincey's whimsical treatment of so terrible a subject, it is necessary to remember, first, that like Nathaniel Hawthorne and certain other imaginative writers, he was a born psychologist in cases of a mysterious or morbid kind, and that the "Newgate Calendar" had so strong an attraction for him that he is said, as editor of the "Westmorland Gazette," to have filled its columns with reports of murder-trials; and secondly that, through his keen perception of the proximity of contrary ideas, the whimsical always lay close to the terrible in his mind. Thus his extravaganza of "Murder considered as one of the Fine Arts," was, indeed, as

he describes it, but "a foam-bubble of gaiety," yet it floats on the surface of very deep and ominous waters; for it was De Quincey's avowed object in writing the paper, and in giving it a fantastic form, "to graze the brink of horror and of all that in actual realization would be most repulsive."

His paradox, then, is this—that murder, like other practices, has its "scenical" and aesthetic features, and (when all deductions have been made for the promptings of morality and compassion) may even be the legitimate subject of art. "Design, gentlemen, grouping, light and shade, poetry, sentiment, are now deemed indispensable to attempts of this nature. . . . We dry up our tears, and have the satisfaction, perhaps, to discover that a transaction which, morally considered, was shocking, and without a leg to stand upon, when tried by the principles of Taste turns out to be a very meritorious performance." Thus, in his serio-comic lecturing capacity, he first leads us "through the great gallery" of murder cases; then, as an *habitué*, introduces us to one of the meetings of the Society of Connoisseurs in Murder; and finally, in his Postscript, gives us that thrillingly realistic account of the performances of Mr. Williams, the great "artist" in homicide, which even Edgar Poe himself has not surpassed. Whether De Quincey's fanciful treatment of this oppressively horrible theme is justified by its artistic success, it is useless here to speculate. What is certain is that "Murder considered as one of the Fine

Arts" is one of the most distinctive of his writings, and that an appreciation of it may be taken as a pretty sure touchstone for determining whether a reader has a sympathetic understanding of the author's peculiar temperament.

Two other humorous essays must at least be briefly mentioned, viz.: "Coleridge and Opium-Eating" and "Sortilege and Astrology." That De Quincey's youthful admiration for Coleridge, to whose "Ancient Mariner," more than to any other work, he attributed the unfolding of his mind, remained in all essential points unshaken, is proved by his description of him, in this very essay of 1845, as "an astonishing man," who, "besides being an exquisite poet, a profound political speculator, a philosophic student of literature through all its chambers and recesses, was also a circumnavigator of the most pathless waters of monasticism and metaphysics"; yet there was also something in Coleridge's character which prompted De Quincey to pass, in that sly way of his, from veneration to banter. The spice of mischief which may be detected in some of his anecdotes about Coleridge, especially when opium is the theme, was doubtless due to the annoyance which he felt at the strictures passed by Coleridge—himself a confirmed opium-eater—on a fellow-sufferer under the drug.

"Sortilege and Astrology" is a pure piece of rollicking humour throughout, written in aid of a literary institution at Glasgow. It narrates how, for this philanthropic purpose, the author drew by lot several papers from a large bath in his

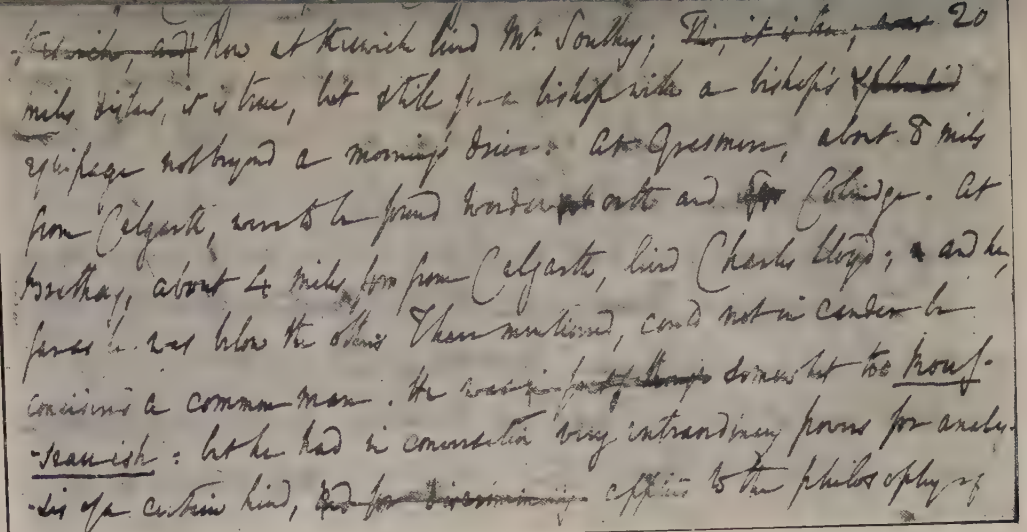
study, which, "having been superseded (as regards its original purpose) by a better, yielded a secondary service as a reservoir for MSS.," and how after fishing up successively a four-year-old invitation to dinner, two unpaid bills, and a lecture on procrastination by "an ultra-moral friend," there was finally drawn—a sheet of blank paper, destined to be the receptacle for the essay on Astrology, an account of a consulting visit paid by him, during his wanderings in North Wales, to a retired local astrologer named "Pig-in-the-dingle." As a specimen of De Quincey's reckless, free and easy style of humour, "Sortilege and Astrology" is of the best.

Lastly, under this first division of his writings, we come to the Tales, which were mostly adaptations from the German or French. There is no need to say much of "Walladmor," a half-serious, half-jocular version of a German parody of Walter Scott, published in two volumes in 1825, or of "Klosterheim" (1832), a romantic and sombre story of German life, which has little merit except a certain measured elegance of phrasing; still less need we dwell on such studies in the grotesque as "The Avenger," "The Incognito,' "The Dice," "The King of Hayti" and "The Fatal Marksman," which are poor indeed as compared with the masterpieces of Poe or Hawthorne. But there is one of De Quincey's tales which takes rank with the very best of his achievements, and that is "The Spanish Military Nun." The genesis of the story is as follows. There was published in 1847 (as Professor Masson has

pointed out), in the "Revue des Deux Mondes," an article entitled "Catalina de Erauso," based on certain early and, as it seems, authoritative memoirs of a famous Spanish adventuress of the seventeenth century, and it was from this quarter that De Quincey's material was derived. His "Spanish Military Nun," first published in three instalments in "Tait's Magazine" in 1847, was a free translation from the "Revue des Deux Mondes," in which, as was his wont, he did not scruple to adapt the records to his liking, and to re-tell the roving nun's adventures in his own characteristic style, with the result that the somewhat coarse female free-lance of the original memoirs reappears in an idealized form. The true value, however, of De Quincey's work lies less in his version of the heroine's character than in the intense zest and vividness which he has breathed into the ancient tale. Nowhere else does he show such grip, such succinctness, such rapidity of narrative, as in the swift and brilliant series of pictures which unfolds the history of his "Kate"; as a *tour de force* and finished piece of workmanship, it stands unique among his writings. The reader's interest is unbroken from the early escape of the child-adventuress from the convent of San Sebastian to the moment of her last mysterious disappearance on the shore of Vera Cruz; every chapter is alive with restless energy and humour, yet over all there broods a high and calm spirit of trustfulness, as in the wonderful passage which describes the nun's solitary descent of the "mighty staircase" of the

Compare with Robinson

the Bishop's Autobiography ~~are~~ some ~~things~~ shews an Character
Prospect with regard to the intellectual pretensions of the neighbourhood in
which he had settled. I have been told, ~~but~~ on pretty good authority,
that this article was written by the Late Dr. Whitaker of Craven, the
topographical antiquarian; a lively sort of person ~~to take upon~~
himself ~~to~~ doubtless to assume such a tone in speaking of the neighbourhood
~~which he took up his abode in~~ & dangling in its intellectual pre-
tensions at that region at that time! The Bishop had fixed his
~~abode~~ on the banks of Windermere: in a small but beautiful
house ~~which he had built~~ purchased on a gleb belonging to Trinity



FROM DE QUINCEY'S ARTICLE ON COLERIDGE.

In the possession of Mr. W. E. Axon.

Andes. The sum and spirit of the story may be gathered from its closing words:

> And here is the brief upshot of all. This nun sailed from Spain to Peru, and she found no rest for the sole of her foot. This nun sailed back from Peru to Spain, and she found no rest for the agitations of her heart. This nun sailed again from Spain to America, and she found—the rest which all of us find. But where it was, could never be made known to the father of the Spanish camps, that sat at Madrid, nor to Kate's spiritual father, that sat in Rome. Known it is to the great Father of All, that once whispered to Kate on the Andes; but else it has been a secret for more than two centuries; and to man it remains a secret for ever and ever.

II. *Essays.* (1) *Historical, Biographical, Critical.*

Under the general title of "Essays," De Quincey suggests the grouping of those papers—comprising, of course, the greater portion of his works—which "address themselves purely to the understanding as an insulated faculty, or do so primarily." He instances his historical sketch of "The Caesars," and what he says of it may be taken as typical of his essays as a whole. "This, though hastily written, and in a situation where I had no aid from books, is yet far from being what some people have supposed it—a simple recapitulation, or *resumé*, of the Roman Imperatorial History. It moves rapidly over the ground, but still with an exploring eye, carried right and left into the deep shades that have

gathered so thickly over the one solitary road traversing that part of history. Glimpses of moral truth, or suggestions of what may lead to it; indications of neglected difficulties, and occasionally conjectural solutions of such difficulties—these are what this Essay offers."

The same is true, and in a far higher degree, of those very fine historical studies, "The Revolt of the Tartars" and "Joan of Arc." De Quincey's method, it must be premised, is what he himself described as "scenical," that is, it proceeds "upon principles of selection, presupposing in the reader a general knowledge of the great cardinal incidents, and bringing forward into especial notice those only which are susceptible of being treated with distinguished effect." In the "flight eastwards of a principal Tartar nation across the boundless steppes of Asia"—the tragic exodus of a whole people fro m Russian to Chinese territory, which took place in the latter part of the eighteenth century—he had a subject which appealed strongly to his imagination, and, as was his habit in such cases, he made a poet's use of his material, with the result that, whatever question there may be as to its correctness in dates and details, there can be none as to the grand spectacular effect of the story of the flight and pursuit as narrated by him—"the fugitive vassals" in front, and in the rear "the gloomy vengeance of Russia and her vast artillery." It is a theme which, in De Quincey's hands, inevitably passes at times into the sphere of the "impassioned."

So too in his sketch of "Joan of Arc," a splendid vindication which has perhaps more claim to be ranked among the prose poems than in the colder category of the historical. It has points of comparison with the "Spanish Military Nun," but it is more ardent and devotional in tone, and here, as in the "Revolt of the Tartars," the humorous element, by a sure instinct, is altogether dropped. Of the other historical sketches the most considerable is "Charlemagne."

Turning to the biographical and critical essays, we find prominent those on Shakespeare, Milton and Pope. The good fame of Shakespeare and Milton is jealously championed against detractors of every school, Dr. Johnson in particular being sharply taken to task for his disparagement of Milton. Towards Pope the attitude is that of a severe but not unfriendly critic; and it is here that De Quincey propounds his well-known distinction between the "literature of knowledge" and the "literature of power." His treatment of Oliver Goldsmith, to whom one of his essays is devoted, is far more sympathetic than of Pope; and in the sketch entitled "Richard Bentley" the long feud of the famous scholar with the Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge, is vividly described. The article on "Wordsworth's Poetry" is one of the few instances in which De Quincey detached criticism from biography and wrote a formal "examination of any man's writings."

In German literature De Quincey's studies covered a wide field. He contributed lives of

Schiller and Goethe to the "Encyclopædia Britannica," and a very hostile critique of Goethe's "Wilhelm Meister" to the "London Magazine." He was also the author of essays on Jean Paul Richter, Lessing, Herder, and other men of note. But the chief of his efforts in this department is his "Last Days of Immanuel Kant," nominally translated from the German, but practically an original work, and exhibiting all the most picturesque and humorous qualities of his mind.

(2) *Essays on Style.* De Quincey's "didactic essays" on literary craftsmanship include the important articles on "Style" and "Rhetoric," both largely historical, and the "Letters to a Young Man whose Education has been Neglected," which appeared in the "London Magazine" in 1823, and called forth the humorous "Letter to an Old Gentleman whose Education has been Neglected" from Charles Lamb. Together with "Style" and "Rhetoric" may be placed the kindred but slighter essays on "Language" and "Conversation."

(3) *Greek and Latin Classics.* Under this head the chief essays are those on "The Philosophy of Herodotus," a fine vindication of the old Greek historian as the great encyclopedist of antiquity; "Plato's Republic," an attempt to dispel the "superstitious reverence" by which Plato's name is surrounded; and "Cicero," a spirited defence of Caesar, one of De Quincey's greatest idols, against Cicero's "blind hatred" and unpatriotic misunderstanding. There are also papers on "Homer and the Homeridæ" and

a number of other classical subjects, including an ingenious paradox on "The Casuistry of Roman Meals" (an attempt to prove that the Romans had neither lunch nor breakfast), and a new reading of "The Theban Sphinx"—forms of intellectual subtlety to which De Quincey was partial.

(4) *Theology.* The leading works of this section are "Miracles as a Subject of Testimony," "Protestantism," and "On Christianity as an Organ of Political Movement." There are also paradoxical essays on "The Essenes," depicting Essenism as a mere invention of the historian Josephus, and on "Judas Iscariot," maintaining that the ordinary conception of Judas's character is erroneous, and that he was no traitor, but an enthusiast who, believing in a temporal kingdom, tried, in all fidelity, to precipitate his master into action.

(5) *Politics ana Political Economy.* Of the political papers, which include "Dr. Samuel Parr, or Whiggism in its Relations to Literature," "A Tory's Account of Toryism, Whiggism and Radicalism," and "The Political Parties of Modern England," the first alone has permanent interest, owing to its scathing castigation of Dr. Samuel Parr, and especially its inimitable personal description of the gossiping old pedant with the "infantine lisp," which has doomed the unfortunate Doctor to an immortality of ridicule.

As a political economist, De Quincey, who was a follower and profound admirer of Ricardo, published the "Dialogues of Three Templars"

(1824), the "Logic of Political Economy" (1844), and short essays on "Malthus" and "The Measure of Value." His writings in this field are chiefly remarkable for the extreme clearness and beauty of language with which he expresses the doctrines of a science which is not usually associated with literary charms.

(6) *Miscellaneous.* In addition to the essays mentioned above, there are a number of articles, dealing with a variety of subjects, which can hardly be classed under any particular head, yet are in many cases very interesting and characteristic, *e.g.*, "On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth," "Casuistry," "Toilette of the Hebrew Lady," "On Suicide," "War," "National Temperance Movements," etc.

III. *Impassioned Prose.*

There now remains the third and most important category of De Quincey's writings, that of the prose poems, to which he refers in his general preface as "a far higher class of compositions," and as "modes of impassioned prose ranging under no precedents in any literature"; a claim to absolute originality which seems to overlook the earlier work of Jean Paul Richter. The "Confessions" and the "Suspiria de Profundis" are cited as leading examples of these attempts "to clothe in words the visionary scenes derived from the world of dreams," in which, it will be observed, the personal note of self-revelation is usually dominant. "The very idea of

breathing a record of human passion," says De Quincey, "not into the ear of the random crowd, but of the saintly confessional, argues an impassioned theme: impassioned therefore should be the tenor of the composition."

The "Confessions of an English Opium-Eater," the work by which De Quincey first became known, and by which he will be longest remembered, was written in a little room at the back of Mr. H. G. Bohn's premises, No. 4, York Street, Covent Garden, and published in the "London Magazine," under the signature "X.Y.Z.," in September and October, 1821. But here, at once, an important distinction must be noted between this earlier form of the "Confessions"—re-issued as a small volume in 1822—and the later, revised edition of 1856. In the former case all the circumstances conspired towards the shortening, in the latter case towards the lengthening, of the merely autobiographical (*i.e.* unimpassioned) element in the story; for the comparative brevity demanded of the unknown writer of articles which had to be brought within the limited scope of a magazine, was exchanged, thirty years afterwards, for the privileged talkativeness of one who had gained a recognized place in literature. As a result, we have what may justly be regarded as not merely an earlier and cancelled text, superseded by a more authoritative one, but rather two separate and independent versions, each possessing for the student of De Quincey's genius a peculiar interest of its own, and each deserving to be permanently en-

shrined in the body of his writings—the one as the more artistic and concentrated effort of his prime, the other as the fuller but not less characteristic expression of his old age. It is somewhat strange to find De Quincey speaking of the earlier "Confessions" as in need of extensive "correction and pruning"; for when the work emerged from this process in 1856, it had actually trebled its size, such "pruning" as had indeed been done (and always with good effect) being greatly outbalanced by the additional matter that was imported, chiefly of the gossiping kind. "It is almost re-written," said De Quincey in a letter of 1855, "and there cannot be much doubt that here and there it is enlivened and so far improved. And yet, reviewing the volume as a *whole*, greatly I doubt whether many readers will not prefer it in its original fragmentary state to its full-blown development."[1] Certainly many readers have so preferred it; yet there is much, too, in the later version which no lover of De Quincey would willingly have missed. To the student, it is most instructive to collate

[1] If any justification were needed for the separate maintenance of the earlier text, it would be found in the above passage. It is odd that Professor Masson, who, in his edition of the complete works, has in many cases reversed De Quincey's judgment, should write as follows of the "Confessions": "By his own act and deed the enlarged edition of 1856 was intended to be the final edition, superseding the other; and by *his* intention we are bound to abide." But such obligation, if binding in the case of the "Confessions," must be binding in the other cases also, and in most of them with much greater force.

the two texts, and thus to compare the De Quincey of 1821 with the De Quincey of 1856.

Reserving for fuller consideration in the next chapter the story and purpose of the "Confessions," let us now pass on to the other instances of De Quincey's "impassioned prose."

The "Suspiria de Profundis" (Sighs from the Depths) are described as "A Sequel to the Confessions of an English Opium-Eater," and in his preface to the first volume of the collected works their author claims for them, prospectively, an even greater merit; but unfortunately the scheme which he made from time to time for a complete series of the "Suspiria" was never realized, and their history is in itself a striking commentary on the difficult and confused conditions under which he did his work. Commenced in "Blackwood" in March, 1845, the publication of the "Suspiria" was abandoned after a few months, though De Quincey still continued to nurse secret plans for its resumption, and was in fact in the habit of mentally classing under the general name of "Suspiria" any of his shorter writings which partook of the phantasy or dream. Then, when he was engaged in the preparation of the earlier volumes of his collected works, the exigencies of the hour on several occasions impelled him to include in the "Autobiographic Sketches," or in the "Confessions," short pieces such as "The Affliction of Childhood," or "The Daughter of Lebanon," which should have formed part of the intended later group of "Suspiria"; with the result that at his

death in 1859 his project was still unaccomplished and had to be carried out, as far as might be, in a posthumous volume (1871), where six "Suspiria"—those that remained as yet uncollected—were brought together under that title. But there were still more to follow; for in editing the "Posthumous Works," in 1891, Dr. Japp was able to include five additional "Suspiria," found among De Quincey's papers, and to give a list of no less than thirty-two pieces, completed or uncompleted, which appear to have been destined to form the material of the intended volume.

It has been well observed by Dr. Japp that "the master-idea of the 'Suspiria' is the power which lies in suffering to develop the intellect and the spirit of man"; an idea which is outlined by De Quincey himself in more than one of these prose-poems. In "The Vision of Life," for instance, he tells how in his own youth there was blended with his happiness an instinctive foreknowledge of the sorrows which time had in keeping for him, and he holds that the true "rapture of life" can only be attained by just this poignant imaginative mingling of pleasure and pain, by "the confluence of the mighty and terrific discords with subtile concords." These Sighs from the Depths are the impassioned expression of the "philosophic melancholy" (not to be confused with joylessness or pessimism) which was a part of De Quincey's temperament.

That the execution of the "Suspiria" was not equal to their conception was avowed by the

author himself, who pointed out the extreme difficulty that attends the writing of this impassioned prose, "where a single false note, a single word in a wrong key, ruins the whole music." It has been said that the most famous and most finished of the "Suspiria," to wit, "Levana and Our Ladies of Sorrow," is "absolutely and by universal admission the finest thing that ever came from De Quincey's pen"; but while the psychological importance and artistic beauty of "Levana" will everywhere be recognized, we cannot all subscribe to any such sweeping assertion, for to some of us it will appear that the most perfect of De Quincey's prose-poems are to be sought less in these isolated and somewhat abstract "Suspiria" than in the more moving, because more human, reveries into which, in the course of his "Confessions" and other writings, he sometimes passes, quite naturally and spontaneously, as the pathos of the recorded incident lifts him to more impassioned thought. With the exception of "Levana," the "Suspiria" are rather fragmentary, the most significant, perhaps, being "The Palimpsest of the Human Brain," and (among those posthumously published) the strange phantasy entitled, "Who is this Woman that beckoneth and warneth me from the place where she is, and in whose Eyes is Woeful Remembrance?"

Far more memorable, however, than these scattered torsos is that passionately conceived and elaborately wrought masterpiece, "The English Mail Coach," which, though designed as one

of the "Suspiria," was detached "for a momentary purpose" and printed in "Blackwood" in 1849, to reappear, five years later, in the fourth volume of the Works. In his preface, De Quincey condescended to give a brief abstract of this prose-poem, and of the inter-relation of its three parts; for it appears that then, as now, it was a cause of bewilderment to some of the critics. It stands, indeed, among De Quincey's writings somewhat as the "Epipsychidion" among Shelley's, a perpetual joy and treasure to the esoteric few, but a puzzle and stumbling-block to the many, who, while praising the opening chapter on "The Glory of Motion"—a brilliantly-written account of the English mail-coach system—are apt to look somewhat askance at "The Vision of Sudden Death," and to shake their heads decidedly at the concluding "Dream Fugue." Yet in truth there is a very real harmony between the three sections, the first of which, far from being the finest in itself, is but introductory to the main theme which is developed in the second—viz.: that "Vision of Sudden Death" of which De Quincey was a witness, as he rode in the dead of night on the Glasgow mail between Manchester and Kendal—while the third part, in which "the actual scene, as looked down upon from the box, was transformed into a dream, as tumultuous and changing as a musical fugue," is the crown and consummation of the whole.

It has been said by Professor Masson that "prosaically described, the paper is a recollection of a fatal accident by collision of the mail,

in a very dark part of the road, with a solitary vehicle containing two persons, one of them a woman." That is certainly a prosaical description, but it is not quite correct; for (if we *must* go into such matters) it is plain from De Quincey's narrative that what he witnessed was a hair-breadth *escape* from the "sudden death" which is so wonderfully portrayed by him; and it was the vision of that agony and that escape, with its picture, again and again repeated, of the lady's form "sinking, rising, raving, despairing," that formed the subject of his dream. "A thousand times," he says, "amongst the phantoms of sleep, have I seen thee entering the gates of the golden dawn—seen thee sinking, rising, raving, despairing; a thousand times in the worlds of sleep have seen thee followed by God's awful angel through storms, through desert seas, through the darkness of quicksands, through dreams and the dreadful revelations that are in dreams; only that at the last, with one sling of His victorious arm, He might snatch thee back from ruin, and might emblazon in thy deliverance the endless resurrections of His love."

CHAPTER III

CHARACTERISTICS OF HIS WRITINGS

THE juxtaposition in De Quincey's genius of the imaginative and the critical element has already been noted; in nearly all his chief writings we see, as his biographer, Dr. Japp ("H. A. Page"), has pointed out, "the logical, or quantitative faculty, working alongside the dreaming, or purely abstractive faculty, without sense of discord." His grave and stately phantasies are relieved, here and there, by flashes of keenest humour, while the critical essays, on their part, have not a few passages interspersed of high poetical power. But it will be generally agreed that De Quincey's chief and final claim to a place among English classics depends far less on the analytical faculty, in which he has been equalled or surpassed by many other writers, than on the visionary and imaginative, in which he has few rivals. His various works are valuable mainly in proportion to the presence of this quality; even his vast range of learning and his discriminating judgment are of subsidiary importance, but as a dreamer and prose-poet he holds a throne from which he is not likely to be deposed.

We have seen how the meditative mood, strongly ingrained in his nature, was quickened by the pathetic incidents of his youth, and how the opium-eating habit, acquired in early manhood, intensified and coloured it. He had the perception, which only great thinkers have, of the deep hidden significances of life in all its aspects and usages. His eye was extraordinarily keen to mark those sublime phases of nature which affect the human heart—the unbroken quietude of the early summer morning; the pomp of the summer noon, suggesting solemn thoughts of death; the "pensive and sympathetic sadness" of the hours immediately succeeding to sunset; the sense of pathos excited by the appearance of the earliest spring flowers, or by the occasional brief resurrection of summer in the closing autumn days. "It is all but inconceivable," he says, "to men of unyielding and callous sensibilities, how profoundly others find their reveries modified and overruled by the external character of the immediate scene around them." Take, for example, the following passage from the "Confessions":

I have had occasion to remark, at various periods of my life, that the deaths of those whom we love, and indeed the contemplation of death generally, is (*cæteris paribus*) more affecting in the summer than in any other season of the year. And the reasons are these three, I think: first, that the visible heavens in summer appear far higher, more distant, and (if such a solecism may be excused) more infinite; the clouds, by which chiefly the eye expounds the distance of the blue pavilion stretched

over our heads, are in summer more voluminous, more massed, and are accumulated in far grander and more towering piles; secondly, the light and the appearances of the declining and the setting sun are much more fitted to be types and characters of the infinite; and thirdly (which is the main reason), the exuberant and riotous prodigality of life naturally forces the mind more powerfully upon the antagonistic thought of death, and the wintry sterility of the grave. . . . On these accounts it is that I find it impossible to banish the thought of death when I am walking alone in the endless days of summer; and any particular death, if not actually more affecting, at least haunts my mind more obstinately and besiegingly in that season.

His ear, too, was almost preternaturally sensitive to the influences of sound, whether in listening to the "pealing anthems" of some mountain stream, or to the "silvery tinkle" of sheep-bells on the Somersetshire hills, or to the thrilling voice of Grassini, or to the melody of the Italian language talked by Italian women in the gallery of the Opera House, or to the music of Beethoven, or to the "infinity," as he expressed it, that is in the tones of the violin. Music was a necessity of his nature; and impassioned dancing, sustained by impassioned music, was the most exalting scene which the world could offer him, "capable of exciting and sustaining the very grandest emotions of philosophic melancholy to which the human spirit is open."

Again, what writer has noted with more profound insight the grand and pathetic features of modern life, the sense of mystery and immensity

suggested by a great human concourse, and the magnetic attraction exercised on the surrounding provinces by "the city—no, not the city, but the nation—of London"? Or who has made us feel, precisely as De Quincey has done, the romance of travelling, the "glory of motion" as revealed in the speed, picturesque surroundings, and perfect organization of the English mail-coach? Nor is this peculiar gift of his genius shown only in his elaborate dream-fugues and opium-visions, but also in his record of many otherwise trivial incidents in his early life, as, for instance, the expectation of the post-chaise on a winter morning—"the early breakfast long before the darkness has given way, when the golden blaze of the hearth, and the bright glitter of candles, with female ministrations of gentleness more touching than on common occasions, all conspire to rekindle, as it were, for a farewell gleam, the holy memorials of household affections." "All circumstances in travelling," he says, "all scenes and situations of a representative and recurring character, are indescribably affecting." Yet a traveller himself De Quincey could hardly be called. He had wandered much in his early days about the coach-roads and by-paths of England and Wales, but his knowledge of foreign lands was derived wholly from books of travel, of which he was a great reader. In this way his mind had become familiar with those "sublime natural phenomena" to which he often makes reference—the sandy deserts of Africa, the solitary steppes of Asia, the silence of Lapland, the

Canadian forests, or the gorgeous sunsets of the West Indies. He seized with rapid intuition on such majestic or picturesque features as struck his fancy in reading, and reproduced them with wonderful effect in the gorgeous imagery of his dreams.

It is this power of suggesting analogies between the realm of sense and the realm of spirit that proclaims De Quincey one of the great mystics of literature, and in spite of his lack of philosophic steadfastness, makes his best writings imperishable. "Of this," he says, "let everyone be assured—that he owes to the impassioned books which he has read many a thousand more of emotions than he can consciously trace back to them. Dim by their origination, these emotions yet arise in him, and mould him through life like forgotten incidents of his childhood." A great portion of his own writings belongs essentially to this class.

But he is very far from being a sublime dreamer only; for side by side with the gravity of his most impassioned thought there lies a strong logical power, which recalls the reader, now and again, from the phantasies of dreamland to the actualities of life, much in the same way as the knocking at the gate in "Macbeth," according to De Quincey's own interpretation, serves to re-establish in the minds of the audience the existence of the world in which they live, after a parenthesis of the world of darkness. The wide scope of his genius is one of the first points to arrest attention. From earliest youth he had

read books of all sorts with insatiable eagerness, and aided by a marvellous memory he thus accumulated a vast store of knowledge on a number of subjects, and being possessed also of an unfailing critical instinct he was able to use his encyclopedic learning with judgment and effect. Whether recording personal studies and anecdotes, or giving his views on some abstruse matter of theology or political economy, or throwing light on some point of classical scholarship which had escaped the grammarians themselves, or expounding the mysteries of the secret societies and "dark sciences" of the middle ages, or discoursing on casuistry, or on the laws of rhetoric and style, or introducing English readers to German literature—in any and all of these subjects he was equally at ease. Had he lived six centuries earlier he would have been a mighty sage or alchemist; living in the nineteenth century, he was the high-priest of magazine writers, and found a ready medium for his oracular utterances in the pages of "Blackwood" and "Tait."

How prodigious his memory was may be judged from his habit of writing on complex subjects when he had no access to libraries; as in the case of "The Caesars," which was written, he tells us, in a situation which denied him the use of books, or when, in referring to Godwin's "Caleb Williams," he stated the outline of the plot thirty-five years after he had read the story. But when it comes to poetical quotations, no memory—not even that of a De Quincey—is to be trusted, and a scrutiny of his excerpts from

Wordsworth and other poets will reveal some startling variations from the original text.

There is, and probably always will be, a difference of opinion as to the quality of De Quincey's humour; for while some of his critics are inclined to value it very highly, others will allow him credit for no more than a "sarcastic pungency" of a second-rate kind. As humorist, he certainly appears in a character which might seem somewhat to conflict with that of an opium-eating visionary; for his humour, far from being pensive or subdued, is keen, bold, and at times almost irrepressible, harping persistently on the subject of its merriment, and returning to it again and again with manifest delight. This mirthful spirit is at its best in such essays as "Murder considered as one of the Fine Arts," "Sortilege and Astrology," and "Coleridge and Opium-Eating," but it will be found scattered throughout his writings, and now and then degenerating into something like mere badinage and horse-play. Such cases, however, are the exception; for as a rule De Quincey's humour is not only delightful in itself, but does good service by acting as a foil and relief to his higher imaginative qualities.

It was as an anecdotist that De Quincey most often allowed his sense of humour to run away with him, and (in odd contrast with his extreme considerateness in other relations) gave offence to the subjects of his playful but rather merciless feats of portraiture. Thus, while we would not willingly lose that story of the walk with Wordsworth, in which it was brought home to De

Quincey's mind that, however fine the poet's appearance in some respects, "the Wordsworthian legs were certainly not ornamental," or that caustic report of an imaginary conversation between the opium-famished Coleridge and the hired man who by his own bidding had been placed at the door of the druggist's shop to prevent his entrance, we cannot but feel a little aghast at the unreserve of the narrator. But De Quincey's stories must not be taken too seriously, for they are brimming over with the exaggeration of his fanciful humour. "All anecdotes," he fears, "are false. I am sorry to say so, but my duty to the reader extorts from me the disagreeable confession, as upon a matter specially investigated by myself, that all dealers in anecdotes are tainted with mendacity. Rarer than the phoenix is that virtuous man (a monster he is—nay, he is an impossible man) who will consent to lose a prosperous story on the consideration that it happens to be a lie."

It has sometimes been suggested that De Quincey might have written a great historical work, as, for instance, on the Roman Empire; and it appears that a history of England in twelve volumes was one of his latest aspirations. It is difficult, however, to believe that he was the right person for such a task, for in the first place he had neither the patience and accuracy of research which are indispensable to the historian, nor any real belief in the substantial truth of history, which, as he thought, "being built partly, and some of it altogether, upon anecdotage, must be

a tissue of falsehoods." That it would have been vain to expect strict historical impartiality from a writer of De Quincey's temperament may be inferred from his remarks on the rights and wrongs of Richard Bentley's long struggle against Trinity College, Cambridge, where, after stating his belief that Bentley was in the right and the College in the wrong, he adds: "But even if not, I would propose that at this time of day Bentley should be pronounced right, and his enemies utterly in the wrong. Whilst living, indeed, or whilst surviving in the persons of his friends and relations, the meanest of little rascals has a right to rigorous justice. But when he and his are bundled off to Hades, it is far better, and more considerate to the feelings of us public, that a little dog should be sacrificed than a great one; for by this means the current of one's sympathy with an illustrious man is cleared of ugly obstructions." This is doubtless said partly in fun, yet it is typical of De Quincey's bias, and it suggests alarming thoughts as to the possible fate of the "little dogs" of history at the hands of so accommodating a writer. De Quincey himself divided history into three classes, the narrative, the philosophic, and the scenical, and it is to the third of these that his own sketches for the most part belong. He seized unerringly on the picturesque characters and the striking scenes; and it is this treatment that lends so great a charm to his best historical essays, such as "The Revolt of the Tartars," or "Joan of Arc."

The key to a right understanding of De Quin-

cey's spirit both in religion and politics, philosophy and criticism, is not difficult to discover. The venerable and the picturesque—these were the two qualities that most strongly influenced him, and enlisted his sympathies most frequently, but not invariably, in the constitutional cause. His mind, like that of Sir Thomas Browne, "almost demanded mysteries," and he held that "an intellect of the highest order must build upon Christianity." He joined in the royalist sentiment that the Puritan creed was "not a religion for a gentleman, because all sectarianism must appear spurious and mean in the eye of him who has been bred up in the grand classic forms of the Church of England or the Church of Rome."

His politics, for the same reason, were a sort of transcendental Toryism, but in spite of his regard for rank, and his veneration for solemn ceremonial, there are many signs in his writings of an admiring regard for any picturesque elements in the Radicalism which he denounced. He warmly defended the characters of Milton and Cromwell from the aspersions of royalist writers, and argued in his essay on "The Falsification of History" that in the seventeenth century—he would not make the same admission in his own age—democratic and popular politics were identical with patriotism. So, too, as concerns what has been called his "John Bullism," it is true that his attitude towards foreign nations, especially towards France, is sometimes rather insular; yet he could do justice to the great events of French history, and he points out the folly of

the strictures passed by the Recluse, in Wordsworth's "Excursion," on the supposed failure of the Revolution. "Whereas, in fact," he cries, "it has succeeded; it is propagating its life; it is travelling on to new births—conquering and yet to conquer."

In like manner, in his literary criticisms, there was usually a sure and instant recognition, superior to any personal ties or prejudices, of great and genuine qualities. He read and admired Wordsworth many years before the world had discovered him; and though deeply antagonistic to Shelley's social creed, he not only appreciated his high poetic genius, but understood, what at that day very few critics could understand, the profound sincerity of his character. Taken as a whole, his many verdicts on thinkers and writers, past and present, were singularly just and discriminating; and when, in editing his collected works, he was able to take a retrospect of his criticisms, he had the satisfaction in some instances, as in that of his scathing article on Dr. Samuel Parr, of pointing to a prophecy fulfilled. But there were a few cases, notably that of his disparagement of Goethe, where he must have felt that his earlier judgment had been in error.

It was, presumably, his veneration for the pomps and pageantries of life that led him to write in defence of such hoary evils—in themselves, one would have thought, most antagonistic to his gentle nature—as war and duelling. Of all romances, the most unbelievably romantic seemed to him to be the abandonment of warfare, and he

feared that any compact of nations for that end would be "the inauguration of a downward path for man"; in like manner he defended the duel as "a direct product of chivalry," safeguarding the principle of honour. We may smile at this; yet in another direction we find De Quincey's intense faith in the dignity of mankind ranging him not only among the reformers, but in a position far in advance of many democrats of to-day—on the principle "that all corporal punishments whatsoever, and upon whomsoever inflicted, are hateful, and an indignity to our common nature, which (with or without our consent) is enshrined in the person of the sufferer."

Thanks be to God, he says, that in this point at least, for the dignity of human nature, amongst the many, many cases of reform destined eventually to turn out chimerical, this one, at least, never can be defeated, injured, or eclipsed. As man grows more intellectual, the power of managing him by his intellect and his moral nature, in utter contempt of all appeals to his mere animal instincts of pain, must go on *pari passu*.

It has been pointed out by Dr. Japp, in his biography of De Quincey, that his democratic sentiments, in this and other respects, were largely due to his contact with the working classes, from whom literary men for the most part stand aloof. Little liking as he had for modern democracy, his personal sympathies were at all times warm and sincere, for owing to his own acquaintance with poverty and suffering he

was quite free from the least taint of Pharisaism. *Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*, this was his watchword in all personal intercourse, whatever medieval Toryism he might preach in his politics; and there are few nobler passages in English literature than those which show De Quincey in this most human aspect, whether comforting the friendless child in the deserted house in Greek Street, or pacing Oxford Street in company with the outcast Ann, or haunting the London markets on a Saturday night and advising some poor family as to the best mode of laying out their scanty wages. How deeply he felt for the sorrows of the poor may be seen from his remark in his old age: "All that I have ever had enjoyment of in life, the charms of friendship, the smiles of women, and the joys of wine, seem to rise up and reproach me for my happiness when I see such misery, and think there is so much of it in the world." In one passage of his works he deprecates the brutal spirit which can look "lightly and indulgently on the afflicting spectacle of female prostitution as it exists in London and in all great cities"; in another he rejoices at the interference of Parliament to amend the "ruinous social evil" of female labour in mines. This noble pity for suffering humanity was one of the most striking features of De Quincey's character, and ought not to be overlooked (as it usually is) by those who lay stress on his lack of the "moral" element. It was much more than a sentimental mood in him; it lay constantly at the base of

his thoughts, and his nature was, in this sense, a profoundly moral one.

Towards the lower animals, too, there is a considerable vein of tenderness in De Quincey's writings, though of zoology he knew little. It has been remarked that he is fond of using similitudes drawn from animal life; but this knowledge was derived mostly from book-lore, as when, in his account of the exhibitions in the Roman amphitheatre, he enumerates with much zest the strange animals, "specious miracles of nature brought together from arctic and from tropic deserts," then first presented to the gaze of the Roman people. He candidly avows that "grosser ignorance than his own in most sections of natural history is not easily imagined"; and when, in the Appendix to his "Confessions," he wrote a beautiful and pathetic account of the death of a little bird, which had been given to one of his children by a neighbour, he added that he could not "ornithologically describe or classify" the bird, beyond a belief that it belonged to the family of finches, "either a goldfinch, bullfinch, or at least something ending in *inch*." But we recall with pleasure the passage in which he confesses his strong liking for the society of cows as a refuge from that of bores and Philistines, and owns himself "not ashamed to profess a deep love for these quiet creatures"; nor can we forget his reference to the ill-treatment of cats, that "the groans and screams of this poor persecuted race, if gathered into some great echoing hall of horrors, would move the

heart of the stoniest of our race." Evidently the sense of pathos which he felt so strongly in the word "pariah" did not relate only to the sufferings of the human.

Let us now turn to a consideration of De Quincey's style. The close interdependence of thought and form is insisted on in his own essay on "Style," where he approvingly quotes Wordsworth's remark that style is not the *dress* but the *incarnation* of thought, and concludes that "in what proportion the thoughts are subjective, in that same proportion does their very essence become identical with the expression, and the style becomes confluent with the matter." Certainly De Quincey's own style is the perfect counterpart of his intellect; there is the same maturity about it from the first (he did not begin to write till he was at his prime); the same stateliness of tone balanced by the same logical accuracy. Language he regarded as a precious thing, "an exquisitely beautiful vehicle for the thoughts," and he deplored the "defects in precision" which he asserted could be found on every page of prose even of the masterpieces of English literature; for which reason he thought no labour too great in the elaboration of his essays. Though not in the strict sense a poet, having even in his youthful days discovered that poetry was not his natural vocation, he none the less devoted a poet's care to the structure of his sentences, and felt all a poet's regard for the sanctity of his mother-tongue. "If there is one thing in this world," he says, "which, next after

the flag of his country and spotless honour, should be holy in the eyes of a young poet, it is the *language* of his country." It is said that he had a strange habit of smoothing and cleaning the greasy Scotch paper-money, and of polishing silver coinage before he parted with it—a fastidiousness which may be regarded, perhaps, as typical of the indefatigable care lavished on his writings before he gave them currency. He had known an author, he tells us (presumably with reference to himself), "so laudably fastidious in this subtle art as to have recast one chapter of a series no less than seventeen times; so difficult was the ideal or model of excellence which he kept before his mind." What sheer pain he suffered from hearing language distorted, may be guessed from his whimsical account of how he was affected by the monstrous word "anteriorly," once and once only encountered. "We heard it," he says, "as we reached the topmost stair on the second floor, and, without further struggle against our instincts, round we wheeled, rushed down forty-five stairs, and exploded from the house."

The secret of De Quincey's style, then, lies in its fitness and lucidity; it conveys precisely the sense that is intended, and attains its effect far less by rhetorical artifice than by an almost faultless instinct in the choice and use of words; as Wilson said of it, "the *best* word always comes up." When his theme is solemn, his language is solemn also; when the mood changes, there is a corresponding change in the style; and to this

sensibility is due the rare intellectual pleasure that we feel in reading him. I say *sensibility*, because it is necessary to point out that there is much more in the form of De Quincey's writings than mere external beauty; there is very true and deep feeling underlying and moulding it. A clarified style such as his—silvery as his own voice—is indeed the expression of a considerate nature, of one whose imaginative sympathy enables him to understand his readers' position as well as his own and to adapt himself to their case; nor is it fanciful to suppose that De Quincey's style, no less than his character, was matured and humanized by the tragic experiences of his youth and by his familiarity—so unusual among literary men—with the lot of the common people. "The market and the highway," he says, "are rich seed-plots for the sowing and reaping of many indispensable ideas."

Let us take as an example of De Quincey's use of that "elaborate stateliness," of which, provided that the occasion be suitable, he expressly approves in his Essay on "Rhetoric," the following passage from his reminiscences of one of his Grasmere friends, the unfortunate Charles Lloyd:

> Charles Lloyd never returned to Brathay after he had once been removed from it; and the removal of his family soon followed. . . . But often and often, in years after all was gone, I have passed old Brathay, or have gone over purposely after dark, about the time when, for many a year, I used to go over to spend the evening; and seating myself on a

stone by the side of the mountain river Brathay, have staid for hours listening to the same sound to which so often Charles Lloyd and I used to hearken together with profound emotion and awe—the sound of pealing anthems, as if streaming from the open portals of some illimitable cathedral; for such a sound does actually arise, in many states of the weather, from the peculiar action of the river Brathay upon its rocky bed; and many times I have heard it, of a quiet night, when no stranger could have been persuaded to believe it other than the sound of choral chanting—distant, solemn, saintly. . . . Since the ruin or dispersion of that household, after the smoke had ceased to ascend from their hearth, or the garden walk to re-echo their voices, oftentimes, when lying by the river side, I have listened to the same aerial saintly sound, whilst looking back to that night, long hidden in the frost of receding years, when Charles and Sophia Lloyd, now lying in foreign graves, first dawned upon me, coming suddenly out of rain and darkness; then young, rich, happy, full of hope, belted with young children (of whom also most are long dead), and standing apparently on the verge of a labyrinth of golden hours.

Next let us quote, in contrast, a typical instance of De Quincey's humorous style, from a passage of which Coleridge, or rather one of Coleridge's puppets, was the victim. The reference is to the succession of bores and nonentities whom Coleridge was apt to set up and worship as original thinkers.

First came Dr. Andrew Bell. We knew him. Was he dull? Is a wooden spoon dull? Fishy were his eyes, torpedinous was his manner; and his main

idea, out of two which he really had, related to the moon—from which you infer, perhaps, that he was lunatic. By no means. It was no craze, under the influence of the moon, which possessed him; it was an idea of mere hostility to the moon. In Madras had Dr. Andrew lived. The Madras people, like many others, had an idea that she influenced the weather. Subsequently the Herschels, senior and junior, systematized this idea; and then the wrath of Andrew, previously in a crescent state, actually dilated to a plenilunar orb. The Westmoreland people (for at the Lakes it was we knew him) expounded his condition to us by saying that he was "maffled"; which word means "perplexed in the extreme." His wrath did not pass into lunacy; it produced simple distraction; an uneasy fumbling with the idea—like that of an old superannuated dog who longs to worry, but cannot for want of teeth. In this condition you will judge that he was rather tedious; and in this condition Coleridge took him up.

Comparing the two extracts quoted above, we are struck at once by their entire dissimilarity in tone—the long, solemn, slow-winding, dirge-like sentences in which the tragedy of Charles Lloyd is narrated, contrasting with the sharp, short, stabbing epigrams which dispose of Dr. Andrew Bell. Yet, as the mood takes us, we read either passage with equal contentment, because in both the style exactly harmonizes with the thought.

It must not be supposed, however, that De Quincey's artistic sense and grammatical accuracy, strict as he was in theory, were never at fault. Some readers, perhaps, will think that his frequent inversion of words became almost an

affectation, as when he describes opium as "an engine so awful of consolation and support," or tells us, in explanation of his first use of the drug, that "simply as an anodyne it was, under the mere coercion of pain the severest"—a mannerism of which numberless examples might be culled from his writings. He must plead guilty, too, to a common but careless use of the English participle which it is strange to find in so great a master of language; as may be seen in the following sentence from which the subordinate parts are omitted: "I remember even yet that when first arrayed, at four years old, in nankeen trousers, all my female friends filled my pockets with half-crowns"—a remark which, while testifying to the generosity of the ladies, seems to leave open to grave misconstruction both their age and their costume.

A more serious, because a more frequent blemish in De Quincey's style is his great discursiveness, the outcome of the immense wealth of knowledge and anecdote with which his mind was filled, and which he was too often tempted to disburse. "The body has an awfu' sight o' words," was the remark of a Scotch cook, who had her orders direct from him; and if he used circumlocution in the ordering of his dinner, far wider was the flight of his fancy in the writing of his works. Thus in the middle of his chapter on Southey we find embedded the story of De Quincey's adventure with the "man mountain," and in the same way we are called off from a dissertation on Coleridge to hear the tragic tale

of the Beauty of Buttermere. It is somewhat amusing to find him, in his Essay on "Style," insisting on the "vast importance of compression"; yet there is truth in his plea that "moderate excursions have a license," and we may comfort ourselves with the thought that, as he elsewhere remarks, "a digression is often the cream of an article." The same might be said of the instructive footnotes which he plentifully scattered over his pages; they contain a rich store of wide and multifarious knowledge.

De Quincey has been blamed for the number of Latin words that are found in his writings; but here he acted deliberately and on principle; for, as he points out, in defending Wordsworth from a similar rebuke, though the Saxon part of our language is the right vehicle for the elementary feelings, the *abstract* conceptions, as in meditative poetry and philosophic prose, demand the prevalence of the Latin. "Long-tailed words in *osity* and *ation*!" he retorts. "What does *that* describe? Exactly the Latin part of our language. Now, those very terminations speak for themselves. All high abstractions end in *ation*; that is, they are Latin, and just in proportion as the abstracting power extends and widens, do the circles of thought widen, and the horizon or boundary melts into the infinite."[1]

De Quincey's chief exemplars in style were Sir Thomas Browne and Jeremy Taylor, the two

[1] For a fuller discussion of De Quincey's style, the reader is referred to Professor Minto's "Manual of English Prose Literature."

great masters to whom he awards the *spolia opima* of English prose literature. The only writer of his own period to whom he bears affinity is Coleridge; and even here the similarity, though very striking as regards certain features of life and character, does not extend to the general manner of thought and expression. Readers of his biographical essay must feel that much of what he says of Coleridge's dreamy nature and dilatory habits would apply equally to himself; and in both cases the use of opium brought at once a weakness and a strength. The same resemblance may be traced in the prodigious memory, great conversational powers, and general intellectual scope of the two thinkers. De Quincey, as he himself remarks, "read for thirty years in the same track as Coleridge—that track in which few of any age will follow us, such as German metaphysicians, Latin schoolmen, thaumaturgic Platonists, religious mystics." Finally, the same reproach has been urged against both, of having wasted their fine powers in desultory tasks, and of having left no single "great work" as their monument.

But what does this charge mean? There is a very true and important distinction, drawn by De Quincey himself, between the "literature of knowledge," whose function is merely to teach, and the "literature of power," which is able also to *move*. It is to the latter class that De Quincey's masterpieces belong; and though their bulk is not great, they may justly claim a place among the supreme achievements of our literature. We may surmise that he was thinking partly of his

own case, when, in an article on Professor Wilson, he defended him from this same charge of desultory writing. He admits that by steadier application his friend might have produced an enormous and systematic book; but then he remembers the Greek proverb: "Big book, big nuisance," and concludes that the Professor did wisely in leaving his works in detached papers, instead of "conglutinating them into one vast block."

It is true that in his highly-coloured picture of "the pains of opium" De Quincey in one passage attributes to opium the failure of his desire to construct a great philosophical work, which was to have been entitled, "De Emendatione Humani Intellectûs"; but we may be pardoned for doubting whether his genius was really suited to a labour of this kind, or whether such a work, if ever accomplished, would have been half as valuable as the "Confessions of an English Opium-Eater," or the "Suspiria de Profundis"; for "great works" are not to be measured by the number of their pages or the ponderous array of their doctrines. Let us, therefore, not grieve overmuch for the loss of the "De Emendatione Humani Intellectûs," for we may be assured that in his impassioned prose De Quincey left the best monument of which he was capable, and if it were through opium that he expressed himself in this form, instead of in a philosophical treatise, we should have to admit that literature owes something to opium. Most great writers, however, have a way of thus musing on some phan-

tom unaccomplished work; witness the "Eureka" of Edgar Poe, and the "Complete Theory of Mind," with which Shelley hoped to enrich the philosophic world. Those who condemn De Quincey because he threw his writings into short papers rather than bulky volumes should remember Addison's satire on the tendency to value books by their size alone—the author of a folio taking precedence of all others. It would be only by the adoption of such a criterion as this, that De Quincey's best writings could be ruled out of the category of great works.

CHAPTER IV

"THE CONFESSIONS OF AN ENGLISH OPIUM-EATER"

HAVING now viewed the leading facts of De Quincey's life, the general order of his works, and his most striking characteristics of thought and style, it remains for us to make a more detailed examination of his recognized masterpiece, which of all his writings is the one that most closely reveals him to his readers. Let us first note that De Quincey's "Confessions of an English Opium-Eater" are not concerned wholly or mainly with opium. That opium plays a great and most fascinating part in the work is indisputable, and it is likely enough that apart from that somewhat morbid element in the story —enhanced by the suggestive title—public interest would not have been captivated in anything like the same degree, a fact of which the author was doubtless conscious when he wrote it. Nevertheless it is clearly stated by De Quincey himself that, in his own design of the book, the importance which attaches to opium was but subsidiary to a higher purpose. "The object of that work," he says, "was to reveal something of

the grandeur which belongs potentially to human dreams. . . . The Opium Confessions were written with some slight secondary purpose of exposing the specific power of opium upon the faculty of dreaming, but much more with the purpose of displaying the faculty itself."

We began by describing De Quincey as the master-dreamer of the nineteenth century, and it would be difficult to overrate the significance attached by him to that phantasmal part of man's nature, which to the generality of men is a matter of mere wonder or unconcern. The faculty of "dreaming splendidly," he remarks, is a rare one, and owing to the "fierce condition of eternal hurry," in which we now live, there is little opportunity to develop it; yet "the machinery for dreaming planted in the human brain was not planted for nothing." Dreams, according to De Quincey's belief, are the gates of the infinite. "The dreaming organ, in connection with the heart, the eye, and the ear, compose the magnificent apparatus which forces the infinite into the chambers of a human brain, and throws dark reflections from eternities below all life upon the mirrors of that mysterious *camera obscura*—the sleeping mind."

We must remember, therefore, in reading the "Confessions," that the dreams therein narrated are not merely incidents, however grand and terrific, in the opium-eater's autobiography, but the very *raison d'être* of his story, to which the whole course of his experiences, including the tremendous struggle with the "mighty drug," is

but introductory and subservient. In De Quincey's words:

> The work itself opened with the narration of my early adventures. These, in the natural order of succession, led to the opium as a resource for healing their consequences; and the opium as naturally led to the dreams. But in the synthetic order of presenting the facts, what stood last in the succession of development stood first in the order of my purposes.

I. Introductory Narration.—De Quincey starts, then, with the inquiry so often addressed to him —how was it that he became an opium-eater— and devotes by far the greater portion of the book to answering that question.[1] It was, he passionately insists, "a sudden overmastering impulse, derived from bodily anguish," that drove him to the use of the drug; and with much wealth of illustration and sarcasm he rebuts Coleridge's unfriendly suggestion that he had sought the pleasures of opium as a mere voluptuary. Physical pain in the first instance, and then the "settled and abiding darkness" that brooded over his life as a result of his youthful sufferings—these he tells us, were the true cause of his opium-eating, and therefore the history of these sufferings is essential to his task.

In great detail, but with a richness of fancy and phrasing which makes each detail impressive, he proceeds to tell the story of his early quarrel

[1] The differences between the earlier and the later text of the "Confessions" have already been noted. It is the later and fuller text that is here followed.

with his guardians, and the circumstances which led first to his unwilling entry at Manchester Grammar School, and then to his fatal elopement from the place. To a psychologist of De Quincey's temperament there was, even in his boyhood, something peculiarly moving in a farewell; and here, as in other instances, he lingers over the recollection of every incident of his departure. Then the die is cast, and we see him on the second evening approaching Chester (his mother's residence) on foot, and before his eyes "an elaborate and pompous sunset hanging over the mountains of North Wales."

A master of all artistic effects, De Quincey was especially skilled in his presentment of *contrasts*; and few things in the "Confessions" are more suggestively beautiful than the serene pastoral episode of his summer in Wales, preceding the dark and terrible winter that awaited him in London, and culminating in that calm, pensive, ghost-like November day, when he set out on his ill-starred journey:

> So sweet, so ghostly, in its soft, golden smiles, silent as a dream, and quiet as the dying trance of a saint, faded through all its stages this departing day, along the whole length of which I bade farewell for many a year to Wales, and farewell to summer. In the very aspect and the sepulchral stillness of the motionless day, as solemnly it wore away through morning, noontide, afternoon, to meet the darkness that was hurrying to swallow up its beauty, I had a fantastic feeling as though I read the very language of resignation when bending before some irresistible agency. And at intervals I

heard—in how different a key!—the raving, the everlasting uproar of that dreadful metropolis, which at every step was coming nearer, and beckoning (as it seemed) to myself for purposes as dim, for issues as incalculable, as the path of cannon-shots fired at random and in darkness.

Not less wonderful is the description of the night of storm that followed, as he waited at a Shrewsbury inn for the mail-coach that was thence to carry him to his destination:

For nearly two hours I had heard fierce winds arising; and the whole atmosphere had by this time become one vast laboratory of hostile movements in all directions. Such a chaos, such a distracting wilderness of dim sights, and of those awful "sounds that live in darkness," never had I consciously witnessed. Rightly, and by a true instinct, had I made my farewell adieus to summer. All through the day, Wales and her grand mountain ranges—Penmaenmawr, Snowdon, Cader Idris—had divided my thoughts with London. But now rose London—sole, dark, infinite—brooding over the whole capacities of my heart. Other object, other thought, I could not admit. Long before midnight the whole household (with the exception of a solitary waiter) had retired to rest. Two hours, at least, were left to me, after twelve o'clock had struck, for heart-shaking reflections. . . . The unusual dimensions of the rooms, especially their towering height, brought up continually and obstinately, through natural links of associated feelings or images, the mighty vision of London waiting for me afar off. An altitude of nineteen or twenty feet showed itself unavoidably upon an exaggerated scale in some of the smaller side-rooms, meant probably for cards or for refreshments. This single

feature of the rooms—their unusual altitude, and the echoing hollowness which had become the exponent of that altitude—this one terrific feature (for terrific it was in the effect), together with crowding and evanescent images of the flying feet that so often had spread gladness through these halls on the wings of youth and hope at seasons when every room rang with music: all this, rising in tumultuous vision, whilst the dead hours of night were stealing along—all around me, household and town, sleeping—and whilst against the windows more and more the storm outside was raving, and to all appearance endlessly growing, threw me into the deadliest condition of nervous emotion under contradictory forces, high over which predominated horror recoiling from that unfathomed abyss in London into which I was now so wilfully precipitating myself.

It has been the lot of not a few writers who have made some mark in literature to record their after-impressions of an early struggle with poverty and loneliness; but there is an almost unique charm and tenderness about this portion of De Quincey's narrative. Intent on the business which had brought him to London, to raise a sum of £200 on personal security from the Jewish money-lenders, he is kept on the tenter-hooks of crafty delays until his small store of guineas—and of hopes—is almost exhausted; yet now, at the very time when his personal fortunes are at the lowest, his innate sense of humanity is seen at its highest and best. Two incidents in this period stand out conspicuous both for the light they throw on this most honourable trait in De Quincey's character, and

for the imperishable record which he has given them in the "Confessions"—his befriending of the little servant girl in the half-deserted house in Greek Street, where he was himself allowed a nightly shelter by the goodwill of the Jew's agent and attorney, and his still more memorable affection for the unfortunate Ann.

Towards nightfall I went down to Greek Street; and found, on taking possession of my new quarters, that the house already contained one single inmate —a poor, friendless child, apparently ten years old; but she seemed hunger-bitten; and sufferings of that sort often make children look older than they are. From this forlorn child I learned that she had slept and lived there alone for some time before I came; and great joy the poor creature expressed when she found that I was in future to be her companion through the hours of darkness. The house could hardly be called large—that is, it was not large on each separate storey; but, having four storeys in all, it was large enough to impress vividly the sense of its echoing loneliness; and, from the want of furniture, the noise of the rats made a prodigious uproar on the staircase and hall; so that, amidst the real fleshly ills of cold and hunger, the forsaken child had found leisure to suffer still more from the self-created one of ghosts. Against these enemies I could promise her protection; human companionship was in itself protection; but of other and more needful aid I had, alas! little to offer. We lay upon the floor, with a bundle of law-papers for a pillow, but with no other covering than a large horseman's cloak; afterwards, however, we discovered in a garret an old sofa-cover, a small piece of rug, and some fragments of other articles, which added a little to our comfort. The poor child crept

close to me for warmth, and for security against her ghostly enemies. . . . Apart from her situation, she was not what would be called an interesting child. She was neither pretty, nor quick in understanding, nor remarkably pleasing in manners. But, thank God! even in those years I needed not the embellishments of elegant accessories to conciliate my affections. Plain human nature, in its humblest and most homely apparel, was enough for me; and I loved the child because she was my partner in wretchedness.

In later years, as he tells us, he made vain efforts to trace the companions of his vigils—the "friendless child" of Greek Street, and ("with far deeper earnestness and far deeper sorrow") the outcast but "noble-minded" Ann, with whom, during his weary waiting in London, he so often paced the "never-ending terraces" of Oxford Street. "I feel no shame," he says, "nor have any reason to feel it, in avowing that I was then on friendly and familiar terms with many women in that unfortunate condition"; and he gratefully records how on one occasion, when he had fainted on the steps of a house in Soho Square, the girl's devotion had saved his life:

O youthful benefactress! how often in succeeding years, standing in solitary places, and thinking of thee with grief of heart and perfect love—how often have I wished that, as in ancient times the curse of a father was believed to have a supernatural power, and to pursue its object with a fatal necessity of self-fulfilment, even so the benediction of a heart oppressed with gratitude might have a like prerogative; might have power given it from above to

chase, to haunt, to waylay, to pursue thee into the central darkness of a London brothel, or (if it were possible) even into the darkness of the grave, there to awaken thee with an authentic message of peace and forgiveness, and of final reconciliation!

The end of the story of Ann is the end of De Quincey's homeless wandering in London. The Jews having at last so far relented as to promise the advance of the money if he could induce his friend the young Earl of Altamont (formerly Lord Westport) to guarantee the payment, he set out on a visit to Eton for this purpose, having arranged to meet Ann on his return; but at the appointed time and place he sought for her in vain.

All was in vain. To this hour I have never heard a syllable about her. This, amongst such troubles as most men meet with in this life, has been my heaviest affliction. If she lived, doubtless we must have been sometimes in search of each other, at the very same moment, through the mighty labyrinths of London; perhaps even within a few feet of each other—a barrier no wider, in a London street, often amounting in the end to a separation for eternity! During some years I hoped that she *did* live; and I suppose that, in the literal and unrhetorical use of the word *myriad*, I must, on my different visits to London, have looked into many myriads of female faces, in the hope of meeting Ann. I should know her again amongst a thousand, and if seen but for a moment. Handsome she was not; but she had a sweet expression of countenance, and a peculiarly graceful carriage of the head. I sought her, I have said, in hope. So it was for years; but now I should fear to see her; and her cough, which grieved me

when I parted with her, is now my consolation. Now I wish to see her no longer, but think of her, more gladly, as one long since laid in the grave—in the grave, I would hope, of a Magdalen; taken away before injuries and cruelty had blotted out and transfigured her ingenuous nature, or the brutalities of ruffians had completed the ruin they had begun.

Then we read of the sudden return to his relatives at Chester; and with a word of farewell to Oxford Street, that "stony-hearted stepmother," and a reference to the strong presentiment which, even then, was pointing his thoughts to Grasmere, to be the scene in later years of so many mingled sorrows and consolations, the first part of De Quincey's "Confessions" comes to a close. How the calamities of his novitiate in London "had struck root so deeply in his bodily constitution that afterwards they shot up and flourished afresh"—in his subjection to opium—is the subject of the remaining sections of his story.

The attempts made by some critics to impugn the truthfulness of De Quincey in these matters and to represent the incidents narrated in the "Confessions" as largely fictitious, have been as unsuccessful as they were ungenerous. "From the very first," he asserted, "I had been faithful to the most rigorous law of accuracy"; and this statement has been confirmed, in all essential points, by later investigation.[1] His wonderful memory enabled him, though writing many years

[1] See the "De Quincey Memorials," edited by Dr. A. H. Japp, ii, 269-271.

after the events, to record his actual experiences as they happened.

II. The Pleasures of Opium.—After relating the circumstances of his first recourse to opium, at the time of profound depression, and the succeeding "resurrection, from its lowest depths, of the inner spirit," De Quincey launches into a discussion of the general effects of opium, as contrasted with those of wine, and insists that whereas wine "calls up into supremacy the merely human, too often the brutal, part of man's nature, the opium-eater feels that the diviner part of his nature is paramount—that is, the moral affections are in a state of cloudless serenity, and high over all is the great light of the majestic intellect." The "pleasures" of opium, as De Quincey presents them, are not sensual but intellectual, and minister not to the intellect only, but to the moral and benignant instincts of the heart. To illustrate this, he gives examples of the increased sensibility which he derived from the use of opium during the period of his visits from Oxford to London between 1804 and 1809, and again at a later date in his Grasmere cottage.

The first passage describes the pleasures of opium and music in combination:

> Tuesday and Saturday were for many years the regular nights of performance at the King's Theatre (or Opera House); and there it was in those times that Grassini sang; and her voice (the richest of *contraltos*) was delightful to me beyond all that I had ever heard. Yes; or have since heard; or ever

shall hear. . . . Thrilling was the pleasure with which almost always I heard this angelic Grassini. Shivering with expectation I sat, when the time drew near for her golden epiphany; shivering I rose from my seat, incapable of rest, when that heavenly and harp-like voice sang its own victorious welcome in its prelusive *threttánelo—threttánelo*. . . . And over and above the music of the stage and the orchestra, I had all around me, in the intervals of the performance, the music of the Italian language talked by Italian women—for the gallery was usually crowded with Italians—and I listened with a pleasure such as that with which Weld, the traveller, lay and listened, in Canada, to the sweet laughter of Indian women; for, the less you understand of a language, the more sensible you are to the melody or harshness of its sounds.

Next among his opium-joys he places the Saturday night rambles, when, at this season "for the chief regular and periodic return of rest to the poor," he would sally forth, without noticing the direction, to the markets of London, to be a spectator, and, so far as might be, a partner of the humble domestic scenes with which he sympathised:

Many a family party, consisting of a man, his wife, and sometimes one or two of their children, have I listened to, as they stood consulting on their ways and means, or the strength of their exchequer, or the price of household articles. Gradually I became familiar with their wishes, their difficulties, and their opinions. . . . Whenever I saw occasion, or could do it without appearing to be intrusive, I joined their parties, and gave my opinion upon the matter in discussion, which, if not always judicious, was

always received indulgently. If wages were a little higher, or were expected to be so—if the quartern loaf were a little lower, or it was reported that onions and butter were falling—I was glad; yet, if the contrary were true, I drew from opium some means of consolation. . . . Some of these rambles led me to great distances; for an opium-eater is too happy to observe the motion of time. And sometimes, in my attempts to steer homewards, upon nautical principles, by fixing my eye on the pole-star, and seeking ambitiously for a north-west passage, instead of circumnavigating all the capes and headlands I had doubled in my outward voyage, I came suddenly upon such knotty problems of alleys, alleys without soundings, such enigmatical entries, and such sphinx's riddles of streets, without obvious outlets or thoroughfares, as must baffle the audacity of porters, and confound the intellects of hackney coachmen. I could almost have believed, at times, that I must be the first discoverer of some of these *terræ incognitæ*, and doubted whether they had yet been laid down in the modern charts of London.

At this period, he tells us, it was to the markets, and theatres, and crowded quarters of London that the opium-spell led him; but in a later phase of his dallying with the drug he surrendered himself to "those trances, or profoundest reveries, which are the crown and consummation of what opium can do for human nature":

At that time I often fell into such reveries after taking opium; and many a time it has happened to me on a summer night—when I have been seated at an open window, from which I could overlook the sea at a mile below me, and could at the same time command a view of some great town standing

on a different radius of my circular prospect, but at nearly the same distance—that from sunset to sunrise, all through the hours of night, I have continued motionless, as if frozen, without consciousness of myself as of an object anywise distinct from the multiform scene which I contemplated from above. Such a scene in all its elements was not unfrequently realised for me on the gentle eminence of Everton. Obliquely to the left lay the many-languaged town of Liverpool; obliquely to the right, the multitudinous sea. The scene itself was somewhat typical of what took place in such a reverie. The town of Liverpool represented the earth, with its sorrows and its graves left behind, yet not out of sight, nor wholly forgotten. The ocean, in everlasting but gentle agitation, yet brooded over by dove-like calm, might not unfitly typify the mind, and the mood which then swayed it. For it seemed to me as if then first I stood at a distance aloof from the uproar of life; as if the tumult, the fever, and the strife, were suspended; a respite were granted from the secret burdens of the heart; some sabbath of repose, some resting from human labours. Here were the hopes which blossom in the paths of life, reconciled with the peace which is in the grave; motions of the intellect as unwearied as the heavens, yet for all anxieties a halcyon calm; tranquillity that seemed no product of inertia, but as if resulting from mighty and equal antagonisms; infinite activities, infinite repose.

Again the scene is changed, and we see De Quincey at the height of his contentment at Grasmere in 1816—the year of his marriage—which, in its comparative freedom from the tyranny of opium, stood "as a parenthesis between years of a gloomier character," a "year of

brilliant water, set, as it were, and insulated in the gloomy umbrage of opium." After digressing to narrate the famous incident of the Malay—a visit received by him in his wayside cottage from a swarthy eastern seafarer, whose fierce outlandish appearance, sharply contrasting with the fair English face of the servant-girl who announced him, took powerful hold of the opium-eater's fancy and played a great part in his subsequent dreams—he proceeds to give us his crowning picture of happiness, as realized in "the interior of a scholar's library, in a cottage among the mountains, on a stormy winter evening, rain driving vindictively and with malice aforethought against the windows, and darkness such that you cannot see your own hand when held up against the sky."

Let there be a cottage, standing in a valley, eighteen miles from any town; no spacious valley, but about two miles long by three-quarters-of-a-mile in average width—the benefit of which provision is that all the families resident within its circuit will compose, as it were, one larger household, personally familiar to your eye, and more or less interesting to your affections. Let the mountains be real mountains, between three and four thousand feet high, and the cottage a real cottage, not (as a witty author has it) "a cottage with a double coach-house"; let it be, in fact (for I must abide by the actual scene), a white cottage, embowered with flowering shrubs, so chosen as to unfold a succession of flowers upon the walls, and clustering around the windows, through all the months of spring, summer, and autumn; beginning, in fact, with May

DE QUINCEY'S COTTAGE AT GRASMERE.

roses, and ending with jasmine. Let it, however, *not* be spring, nor summer, nor autumn; but winter, in its sternest shape. This is a most important point in the science of happiness. And I am surprised to see people overlook it, as if it were actually matter of congratulation that winter is going, or, if coming, is not likely to be a severe one. On the contrary, I put up a petition, annually, for as much snow, hail, frost, or storm of one kind or other, as the skies can possibly afford. Surely everybody is aware of the divine pleasures which attend a winter fireside—candles at four o'clock, warm hearth-rugs, tea, a fair tea-maker, shutters closed, curtains flowing in ample draperies on the floor, whilst the wind and rain are raging audibly without.

"And at the doors and windows seem to call
As heaven and earth they would together mell;
Yet the least entrance find they none at all;
Whence sweeter grows our rest secure in massy hall."
Castle of Indolence.

The "fair tea-maker" in the above passage is De Quincey's wife, the "M—" to whom he several times alludes with grateful affection in the course of the "Confessions." "Paint her arms like Aurora's," he adds, "and her smiles like Hebe's; but no, dear M—! not even in jest let me insinuate that thy power to illuminate my cottage rests upon a tenure so perishable as mere personal beauty, or that the witchcraft of angelic smiles lies within the empire of any earthly pencil." It was M— who was to tend and aid him during his "dread contests with phantoms and shadowy enemies," to act as his amanuensis when he wished to record his

thoughts, and to save his "whole domestic economy" from falling into "irretrievable confusion."

III. The Pains of Opium.—Passing over the dissertation on the medicinal properties of opium with which this last chapter of the "Confessions" commences, we are brought to the final scene of De Quincey's terrible prostration during the years that immediately succeeded his marriage. New and unsuspected symptoms had now begun to assert themselves. At night, when he lay awake in bed, "vast processions" moved visibly before him "in mournful pomp"; and in his sleep a theatre seemed to be opened and lighted up, "which presented nightly spectacles of more than earthly splendour." A funereal melancholy brooded over him; the sense of space and time was amplified to an extent which became torture; while the minutest incidents of his early life were revived and re-enacted. Then, finally, "the tyranny of the human face began to unfold itself." The Malay, "a fearful enemy for months," nightly transported the dreamer into grotesquely frightful surroundings of Asiatic scenery; then Egypt added her monstrous symbols to the scene, and the "cursed crocodile" was the agent of unspeakable horror.

Let us quote, as final specimens of his ghostly experiences, the two dreams which De Quincey has placed at the end of his "Confessions," doubtless because he felt (as most of his readers will feel) that they mark the very highest point of his impassioned prose.

I thought that it was a Sunday morning in May; that it was Easter Sunday, and as yet very early in the morning. I was standing, as it seemed to me, at the door of my own cottage. Right before me lay the very scene which could really be commanded from that situation, but exalted, as was usual, and solemnised by the power of dreams. There were the same mountains, and the same lovely valley at their feet; but the mountains were raised to more than Alpine height, and there was interspace far larger between them of savannahs and forest lawns; the hedges were rich with white roses; and no living creature was to be seen, excepting that in the green churchyard there were cattle tranquilly reposing upon the verdant graves, and particularly round about the grave of a child whom I had once tenderly loved, just as I had really beheld them, a little before sunrise, in the same summer when that child died.[1] I gazed upon the well-known scene, and I said to myself, "It yet wants much of sunrise; and it is Easter Sunday; and that is the day on which they celebrate the first-fruits of Resurrection. I will walk abroad; old griefs shall be forgotten to-day: for the air is cool and still, and the hills are high, and stretch away to heaven; and the churchyard is as verdant as the forest lawns, and the forest lawns are as quiet as the churchyard; and with the dew I can wash the fever from my forehead; and then I shall be unhappy no longer." I turned, as if to open my garden gate, and immediately I saw upon the left a scene far different; but which yet the power of dreams had reconciled into harmony. The scene was an oriental one; and there also it was Easter Sunday, and very early in the morning. And at a

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[1] The reference is to the death of little Kate Wordsworth in 1812.

vast distance were visible, as a stain upon the horizon, the domes and cupolas of a great city—an image or faint abstraction, caught perhaps in childhood from some picture of Jerusalem. And not a bow-shot from me, upon a stone, shaded by Judean palms, there sat a woman; and I looked, and it was—Ann! She fixed her eyes upon me earnestly; and I said to her at length, "So, then, I have found you at last." I waited; but she answered me not a word. Her face was the same as when I saw it last; the same, and yet, again, how different! Seventeen years ago, when the lamp-light of mighty London fell upon her face, as for the last time I kissed her lips (lips, Ann, that to me were not polluted!), her eyes were streaming with tears. The tears were now no longer seen. Sometimes she seemed altered; yet again sometimes *not* altered; and hardly older. Her looks were tranquil, but with unusual solemnity of expression, and I now gazed upon her with some awe. Suddenly her countenance grew dim; and, turning to the mountains, I perceived vapours rolling between us; in a moment all had vanished; thick darkness came on; and in the twinkling of an eye I was far away from mountains, and by lamplight in London, walking again with Ann—just as we had walked, when both children, eighteen years before, along the endless terraces of Oxford Street.

Then suddenly would come a dream of far different character—a tumultuous dream—commencing with a music such as now I often heard in sleep—music of preparation and of awakening suspense. The undulations of fast-gathering tumults were like the opening of the Coronation Anthem; and, like *that*, gave the feeling of a multitudinous movement, of infinite cavalcades filing off, and the tread of innumerable armies. The morning was come of a mighty day—a day of crisis and of ultimate hope for human nature, then suffering mysterious eclipse,

and labouring in some dread extremity. Somewhere, but I knew not where—somehow, but I knew not how—by some beings, but I knew not by whom —a battle, a strife, an agony, was travelling through all its stages—was evolving itself, like the catastrophe of some mighty drama, with which my sympathy was the more insupportable from deepening confusion as to its local scene, its cause, its nature, and its undecipherable issue. I (as is usual in dreams where, of necessity, we make ourselves central to every movement) had the power, and yet had not the power, to decide it. I had the power, if I could raise myself to will it; and yet again had not the power, for the weight of twenty Atlantics was upon me, or the oppression of inexpiable guilt. "Deeper than ever plummet sounded," I lay inactive. Then, like a chorus, the passion deepened. Some greater interest was at stake, some mightier cause, than ever yet the sword had pleaded or trumpet had proclaimed. Then came sudden alarms; hurryings to and fro; trepidations of innumerable fugitives, I knew not whether from the good cause or the bad; darkness and lights; tempest and human faces; and at last, with the sense that all was lost, female forms, and the features that were worth all the world to me; and but a moment allowed—and clasped hands, with heartbreaking partings, and then—everlasting farewells! and, with a sigh such as the caves of hell sighed when the incestuous mother uttered the abhorred name of Death, the sound was reverberated—everlasting farewells! and again, and yet again reverberated—everlasting farewells!

And I awoke in struggles, and cried aloud, "I will sleep no more!"

In conclusion a word must be said about De Quincey's forerunners and successors (if any) in

this realm of visionary thought. Jean Paul Richter alone preceded him as a prose artist in the imagery of dreams, and of followers in the same style he has had but few. The "Confessions," indeed, have been paraphrased by De Musset and Baudelaire, and we may here and there trace De Quincey's influence in the weird nocturnes of Poe, and still more plainly in the sombre "Phantasies" of James Thomson; while in poetry —if the comparison of verse with prose be here admissible—there was a still closer kinship between De Quincey's dream-fugues and such night-inspired rhapsodies as Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and "The Pains of Sleep."[1] But when all is said, it must be owned that, in this kingdom of dreamland, the author of the "Confessions of an English Opium-Eater" remains almost without predecessor or posterity, without companion or rival—our one acknowledged interpreter of the mystic and the sublime.

[1] There may be found, too, in a comparatively recent but almost unknown book of verse, the "Phantasmagoria" of John Barlas ("Evelyn Douglas"), a most imaginative expression of that sense of the strange solemnity of China and the Orient as "the seat of awful images and associations," which is so characteristic of De Quincey's "Confessions."

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